

The Wise One

Book Three:Being

Arc One

Set the Stage

The world is become a stage;

We put the pieces into place.

We need a little time to age—

We ask for one more day of grace.

We line up when told stage left;

The search for props now starts.

We act with souls bereft,

We play with darkened hearts.

The things we've been and seen—

(The things we now are seeing)

Not just a stage small and mean,

It's our lives and we are being.

“The question, O me! so sad, recurring— What good amid these, O
me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists, and identity;

That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse.”

~ O me! O life! ~ Walt Whitman ~

Chapter One

It would be so easy to walk away, to forget, to go somewhere and simply live. He had tons of money and a comfortable familiarity with both worlds. He flapped his powerful wings, thinking on how easy it would be to let them carry him higher and farther, until his bright eyes lost sight of the city, until they took him so far away that he could pretend it didn't exist.

It would stop hurting, after a while. The pain of being alone was only sharp for a short time, then it would fade into a dull ache, then he would forget what it was like to love someone. Then he would be free. Truly free, not trying to get high on this illusion of freedom that soaring through the night represented. That desire for freedom—from responsibility, from obligation, from the feeling that his entire life had been written before his birth and he was only reading the script—was like an ache in him. It was like an injury that you could ignore unless you flexed the wrong muscle and aggravated it. But it would stop hurting if he kept flying. Just kept going after he passed the landmarks that said he'd been out long enough.

A dog barked, far below him. It made memories intrude on his careful, wishful thoughts. Memories of a big black creature streaking across a starlit Chilean landscape. Of that same animal being joined by another, in a dark forest, an even larger dog whose smell screamed "danger." Swooping low to tease, a quick flick of his wings to dodge the swipe of a paw, a doggy grin and his own screech of amusement. The memories made him adjust his flight and turn. The pain of being alone might only last for a while, but the guilt of abandoning them would never fade.

Besides, he'd only held Hermione's hand for the first time last week, and he'd be damned if he was going to walk away from something he'd started again.

"Morning," Harry said casually, hiding his smirk behind his cup. The two people who comprised his family were entering the kitchen with

identical slit-eyed, stubbly-chinned, zombie shuffles. Remus was usually up earlier than Sirius, but he'd been at work pretty late. Apparently, assistant managers at Muggle restaurants got crap hours. Remus had mentioned that once or twice. But the awful shifts did nothing to detract from his joy at steady work, despite it being in the Muggle world. They were a lot nicer about medical situations that took you away for two or three days each month, if you call piling on work the next week "nicer." Asked less questions about it, at least, than a wizard would.

They both headed for the coffee pot, which Harry had brewed as usual, then spent the last fifteen minutes staring at, tempting himself with it. Since they were out of bed, Harry got the waffle batter he'd made out of the icebox and started cooking it. He'd been asking Molly Weasley's advice on several cooking charms, and she'd made sure to give him a witches' cookbook in thanks for saving Arthur—so it was no trouble for him to slice a few pieces off the loaf of grain bread he'd picked up yesterday and toast them without burning the waffles. He did give the waffles a melancholy look before spreading his all-natural fruit preserves on the toast and taking a bite.

Sirius finally noticed that he was drinking juice, not coffee, and was not happily pouring syrup over what was on his plate.

"Harry? What's going on?"

"Mmm?" he said through a mouthful of surprisingly good sugar-free preserves.

"What did you do to the coffee and the waffles?" Sirius asked sternly, suddenly far more awake. He held his fork like a weapon, pointed at his plate. "You put a potion in it, didn't you?"

Remus jerked and raised his coffee, sniffing at suspiciously.

"I didn't," Harry protested, scowling. "That's nice, you automatically think the reason I'm not eating waffles is because I poisoned them."

"Not poisoned, just . . ." Sirius glared at him. "What's in these?"

“Eggs, flour, m—”

Sirius cleared his throat.

“Nothing,” he insisted. “I’m not eating it because I’m detoxing!”

“You’re what?” Remus asked, the look in his eyes saying that Harry had grown extra limbs, at least.

“Clearing my system of all the junk, you know? I drink too much caffeine, and I’ve got all these preservatives and saturated fats floating around. I wanted to start eating healthier. I mean, what good do the workouts do me if I’m just going to ruin them with what I eat?” Both men eyed their waffles.

“But you’ll feed it to us?”

“When did you say you wanted to detoxify? You’d have killed me if I didn’t make coffee.”

“So what you’re saying,” Remus said slowly, “is that you didn’t put anything weird in the waffles. They’re just bad for us already.”

“Basically.”

The two men looked at each other, shrugged, and resumed eating.

“This sudden interest in your health . . .” Sirius said.

“Is because I’m planning to live for a very long time,” Harry said firmly. “So I’m going to take care of my body.”

Sirius sighed.

“What?”

“You should have just said Voldemort came knocking again.”

Harry pretended interest in the pulp at the bottom of his glass of orange juice.

“What did he say this time?”

“Nothing much.”

“You’re kind of overreacting to ‘nothing much,’ don’t you think?”

Harry grimaced. Yeah, he probably was. And he shouldn’t even let it get to him like this, Voldemort had been trying to goad him all summer. But it really just pissed him off that someone could get into his brain.

Remus, who was closer, put a hand on his shoulder.

“I know you got a raw deal with this, but we’re proud of you,” he said.

“Thanks,” Harry muttered.

When he stood up to put his dishes in the sink for Kreacher, Sirius stood up, too, and dragged him into a hug. Harry fought him for a minute, but Sirius wouldn’t let go.

“You might not think so, but you’re doing great,” he said softly. “I love you, kiddo.”

Harry sighed. “I’m still not going to drink coffee for a while.”

“Oh, you love me, too? How nice.”

Harry chuckled and pushed away. “Okay, okay, I do. Eat, so you can get cleaned up.”

“Oh, that’s right. The lovely Miss Granger is coming over this morning. I’ll be sure to be on my best behaviour.”

Mollified, Harry put away the bread and jar of fruit. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sirius hang his tongue out of his mouth and begin panting, dog-like. Harry glared at him, and the tongue disappeared, but Sirius winked at Remus.

“Not my time of the month, Padfoot, afraid you’re on your own,” Remus murmured.

Harry tried not to giggle. That just sounded so wrong.

“What?” the two men said in unison.

Harry just shook his head. “It might be time for you two to start dating. Women,” he added with a smirk.

They both tried to tackle him at once. Harry slid out of his chair, under the table, and was out of the room before they’d figured out he’d moved.

Sirius looked at Remus and grimaced.

“He’s probably right.”

“I’m not the one who’s paranoid about leaving the house just in case Harry decides to try to get himself killed again.”

“He’ll be fine,” Sirius decided. “We’re going out tonight.”

“I have to work.”

“Only until ten! It’s Saturday!”

Remus just laughed. “I think we’re quoting ourselves word-for-word, from a conversation we had at the age of nineteen.”

Sirius fixed him with a glare. “No changing the subject. We’re doing it. Now let’s get ourselves cleaned up so Harry’s girl doesn’t think we’re a bunch of barbarians.”

“But what about a will?” Hermione frowned. “If you leave such an object to another in your will, would they actually, legally, take possession of your soul?”

“No, because you wouldn’t actually, legally, be dead,” Harry countered. “This is the faked-death scenario. The will wouldn’t stand up in court if the person was still alive.”

“Oh, right. But say you were to—”

Harry shoved the book across the kitchen table and groaned. Loudly. They’d been studying what information they could gather on Horcruxes for several hours, and coming up with increasingly unlikely scenarios so that they could be sure they understood every possible situation under which one might find a Horcrux. He was worn out with studying.

“We’ve got to quit,” he begged her. “Just for today.”

“Pay up,” Sirius murmured to Remus down the hall in the study. “He broke first. Told you.”

Remus grudgingly handed over the Muggle pound note that Sirius was so fascinated with. They’d been betting on who’d tire of studying first. Remus had just been hoping it happened to one of them before he had to leave for work and take Sirius’ word for it.

Hermione gave Harry a look of consternation. “But we have to figure out—”

“Hermione. The nature of Horcruxes has not changed since we sat down this morning. They’ll still operate by the same rules tomorrow, and we can finish understanding how they work then. Now come on,” he pleaded softly. “I’ve got you for a whole day, and we have to do something fun.” Like not be worried about Voldemort for a few fucking hours . . .

“Fun? Like what?”

Harry shrugged, trying to think. “We could go see a movie, or go to Diagon Alley and poke around. Go out to eat. See if there’s any good concerts. I could take you flying.”

At that, Hermione shuddered. "I hate flying."

"Okay, no flying. Let's do Muggle stuff."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean all the stuff that Muggles do! Let's take the tube, and we'll go to a museum, and then we can go visit Remus' restaurant for dinner."

Hermione perked up at that. The word museum was practically an enlivening spell on her. Museums were nice. Better yet, they were not Horcruxes, at least he hoped not, so they could get away from books for a few hours. He loved doing research, but she was ten times worse than him.

"Come on, it'll be fun to try to guess which paintings were done by wizards at the National Gallery."

Thus tempted, they set off, telling Sirius where they were going. Sirius was going out to pick up a couple of books for the coming term at school, anyway, so he just checked that they had their wands and told Harry to remember his training.

"What did he mean by that?" Hermione asked Harry as they headed for the nearest tube station. "Remember your training?"

"Know where all the doors are. Pay attention to where people are in a room, and where their eyes are. Watch them move, judge who knows how to fight. Stay on guard."

Hermione frowned. "That doesn't sound like a good way to enjoy a museum. Harry, there won't be Death Eaters there. Do you really have to be like that?"

Harry shrugged. "It doesn't even require effort, anymore. I'll be able to enjoy the museum. Unless it's really crowded," he amended.

"Do you do that at school?"

"I do it all the time," he said, giving her a smile to take away the strangeness of what he was saying. "It's almost second nature. Miguel, my training master, used to jump me at really weird times just to make sure I was paying attention. Even snuck into my room while I was sleeping a couple of times. I've been sleeping with one eye open for a long time and checking the exits everywhere I go."

They descended the stairs and fed Harry's Muggle coins into the machine to purchase their tickets. Hermione was obviously thinking about what to say. But when Harry turned to face the automated gate system and saw how many people were down here, and how shortly he would be in the middle of them, his eyes began roaming and he became very tense. He marched Hermione forward, feeding their cards through, and began to march toward their platform.

Hermione ran her fingers down his arm, catching his attention and loosening the fist he'd made of his hand. She slipped her fingers through his.

He looked down at her with a little smile quirking his lips. "You're not going to say anything? Like, 'you're a freak, knock it off' or something?"

"I don't think you want to hear that I'm sorry for you, and I doubt you'll listen if I tell you to turn it off, nobody's going to attack us. But I can remind you that I'm with you, at least."

Harry squeezed her hand. "Not sure what I did to deserve having a pretty girl stand by me, but I'll take it."

Hermione gave him a scolding look. "You've done plenty, so stop that. Now, let's go. I plan to enjoy myself very much, and you'd better enjoy yourself with me."

"Yes, ma'am," he laughed, and they stepped off the platform and onto the car. Taking care to mind the gap between, of course.

"You know, this place is a breeding ground for Dark creatures that prey on travelers," Hermione said brightly. "I'm almost certain that's why they started making that announcement."

Harry chuckled and squeezed her hand again.

“What?”

He shook his head.

“What?”

“I doubt you’ll listen if I tell you to turn it off . . .” he teased.

She removed her hand from his so she could properly smack him on the shoulder. “It’s an interesting theory!” she huffed.

He captured her hand and kissed her fingers. “Yes, it is. Sorry.”

She had stiffened at the kiss. He carefully let go.

“Sorry,” he said again.

“No, I am,” she murmured. “This isn’t fair to you Harry, you should have a girlfriend who can let you do that. I know you’re just trying to be affectionate. You should date someone who can appreciate—”

“Stop,” he said firmly. “Obviously you do appreciate it, since you know exactly what I meant by it. And I don’t care about fair, or about other girls. I’m not interested in them. I’m interested in you. Even if you come with a few problems. Not like I don’t have a few of those, as well.”

As he spoke, Harry pulled her in to his side, putting his arm around her. She snuggled against his side. This, for some reason, she didn’t mind. But then, they’d been able to hug all this time. It was the really romantic gestures, the kisses and the glances at her body, that bothered her. He rested a hand in her hair and breathed in the smell. She always smelled like flowers and a little bit like ink. If this was what she’d give him, he’d take it. She fit very nicely right there.

“I don’t deserve you,” she whispered.

Harry just smoothed her hair.. "I plan to enjoy myself very much today," he said in a teasing voice. "You'd better enjoy yourself with me."

She laughed, and he experienced the absolutely pleasant sensation of having it resonate through him, since she was pressed against him. He resolutely tried not to think about what he really wanted to think about. "Yes, sir," she answered.

Their determination to have fun and relax eventually melted away and became actual feelings of fun and relaxation. They browsed the gallery until it closed, then went to the restaurant where Remus worked so they could get dinner. For teenagers in the midst of a war, fearing they wouldn't live through it, they managed to have quite a good time.

"You can't tell me that Dumbledore doesn't know all this," Hermione said, her face set. "You're lying to me, or omitting something, which is just as bad."

Harry sighed in frustration. "I'm not. I never said that Dumbledore didn't know, I just said I had to find out on my own."

Hermione's hands were on her hips. She'd gotten up from the table because she was mad at him, and he wished she'd just sit down. "That's still omission. What's going on?"

Harry gestured at their books. "This is dangerous stuff, Hermione. Foul, Dark stuff. And Dumbledore doesn't really know me that well."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that for all he promised to, I don't think he was planning to share all his information with me. He doesn't trust me with Horcrux lore. He probably thinks I'll use it."

Hermione gave him a careful look. "Would you?"

Harry looked at their notes and cracked old book, spread out over the table. It was tempting. Very, very tempting. The idea was a little bit

thrilling, and the arcane ritual of it was fascinating. Dumbledore might be right about him.

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very sure. The type of sacrifice that this requires . . . I’m not a murderer. I won’t kill for any reason. Especially not simply for my own gain. It’s interesting, academically. But I would never do this. And I would never share this information with anyone unless I knew for certain they wouldn’t, either. Having the knowledge of it is a power all its own.”

“You’re sure about me, then.”

“Yes, I am,” he said firmly. “Sit down.”

She did. “You really think Dumbledore doesn’t trust you?”

“Well, I think he knows I’m reliable. He knows I mean to see things through, that I’m fighting on his side. But I’m sure he finds me dark enough to at least think about using this knowledge. He seemed a little bit panicked when I told him I knew what the diary was, and he said he was too busy to talk.”

“Why would he think that about you?”

“Because I am dark enough,” Harry said with a bitter smile. “Why do you think I cling so closely to you and to my family? You guys keep me from doing anything stupid. So long as I have people I care about more than myself, I’ll remember why I don’t do this kind of stuff. Merlin help me if I lose all of you and don’t have anybody to care if I live, die, or become immortal.”

“You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for,” Hermione said sternly.

“Probably. I have very clear ideas about right and wrong. I just worry that I could forget them one day. Like if the Elder Wand was in front

of me,” he mused. “I think it’s a bad idea, but would I take it, if my family wasn’t there to stop me? Would I be enticed by the power?”

“The Elder Wand?” Hermione snorted. “The Deathstick? That is such a load of waffle, I can’t believe you think it’s real!”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t really know if it is or if it isn’t,” he said calmly. “There’s a lot of literature out there about it, so it’s obviously based on something true. Maybe nothing more than the reputation of a fantastic dueller who thought it would boost his fame to claim his wand was unbeatable, and started a trend. But if there is something like that, I could totally see it tempting me. After all, I’m a lot more sure about what I’d do with it than what some other guy would do with it.”

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione moaned. “I didn’t think you were so gullible. It’s a fantasy, propagated by weak wizards who want to believe they could become great.”

“So are Horcruxes,” he said.

“Horcruxes are real!”

“So might this wand of power be real, then.”

“If it was real, someone would have it,” she sniffed. “I haven’t heard anybody claiming it.”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe they got wise when they saw the hundreds of years of bloody history and thought they’d keep it to themselves so they wouldn’t get challenged for it.” It’s what I would do . . .

“Can we stop talking about silly old legends and get back to our studies?”

“Oh, fine. But I’m going to ask Dumbledore if he has any thoughts about whether or not the Elder Wand is real.”

“If he doesn’t want you to know about Horcruxes, what makes you think he’ll talk to you about the Elder Wand?”

He sighed. "Good point. Well, good thing I like reading." He glanced up at the clock. "Oh, we'd better put the books away. I promised to make lunch for everybody, remember?"

Hermione was looking at him with narrowed eyes. "I still think this is an elaborate hoax, somehow. You are a sixteen-year-old boy who likes to read, cook, and keep house, and doesn't mind taking a relationship slowly. You are a figment of my imagination. That is the only explanation."

Harry began poking around the icebox, trying to figure out what to cook. "The real explanation is kind of a long story, so that'll have to do. Stop talking like I'm perfect, I've pissed off the Dark Lord. And I leave the toilet seat up."

"What's the long story?"

"The way I was raised. Sirius and I had to take care of each other, so I just got used to taking turns making dinner and cleaning the bathroom. I already knew quite a bit about cooking and cleaning from when I lived with my mother's relatives, the ones I never talk about because they were awful to me. Reading was all Sirius's fault. He made me read until I liked it, let me read until I loved it, and now . . ." He sighed with great drama. "Now it's sort of an obsession. There's just so much to know out there. Like all about the Elder Wand," he said pointedly, putting aside his playacting. "I'm going to read up on the legends about it. Especially the ones that say there were three objects that all went together. There was the wand, and something else I don't remember, and a cloak. I remember hearing a story about them, probably from Sascha. The cloak was supposed to be a completely invincible Invisibility Cloak. That would come in handy."

"There's no such thing as an unbeatable invisibility cloak," Hermione scoffed, taking on the task of cutting up the fruit he'd gotten out for fruit salad while he went to work on slicing turkey and cheese for sandwiches.

"James had a pretty good one," came a voice from the hallway. They turned to see Sirius in the process of leaning against the doorjamb. "I don't know what happened to it, come to think of it, but your dad had

this absolutely amazing Invisibility Cloak. We used to use it all the time, to get into trouble at school and then to do some of our work for the Order. Wonder if it got donated somewhere, a lot of their stuff did. You don't remember seeing it in those boxes in your vault, do you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I don't. Oh, well. I doubt it's the legendary one, anyway."

"Oh, you guys aren't talking about that Deathly Hallows crap, are you?" Sirius said, rolling his eyes. "It's just a fairy tale, number one, and I think this Horcrux stuff is far more important right now, number two. How's your research on that coming?"

"I've got a very good grasp on what they are and how they work," Harry answered promptly, although he was filing away the term Deathly Hallows in his brain for future use. "What's left to do is find out how many he has, since he obviously has more than one, and what they are."

"Oh, just a day's work," Sirius scoffed. "How do you propose we find that out?"

"Convince Dumbledore that I'm not going to make my own so he'll talk to me about them," Harry muttered.

Sirius frowned. "He's not actually refusing to compare notes with you, is he?"

"Not yet, but I haven't pushed him."

"I'll talk to him. And rack my brain for what I remember about Voldemort to see if I have any knowledge about his Horcruxes lurking in there."

"Don't talk to him," Harry said. "I will. Soon. But feel free to rack your brain."

"All right. Since your research seems to be coming along just great, how's lunch coming?"

Harry flicked his wand and sent a stack of plates zooming out of the cabinet toward him. "Faster, if you set the table."

He smirked at Sirius, and went back to work on the sandwiches, but his mind was elsewhere. It was on his loved ones. On how much they meant to him.

Don't ever leave me, he thought, looking around the kitchen as Remus joined them and began pouring drinks. The three people in this room meant more to him than anything. They were his real reason for being who he was. I don't know who I'd be without you.

His mind flashed to the snake-like face that had picked at his dreams this summer, and he shuddered.

Not him. I'd never be him.

A/N: Aaaaand I'm back! Fair warning to you all: lots of stuff is going to happen, and the plot will advance fairly quickly, but as should have become obvious, this is a Harry/Hermione fic and there will also be plenty about their relationship in here. Now, since the Hallows and Horcruxes existed before Harry was born, they are still an integral part of the story, but I'm not planning to spend a ton of time on them, since we all know what they are, etc. Some major events are still going to be the same: There is still a Horcrux hunt. Voldemort still wants Dumbledore and Harry dead. Harry is still a teenager who doesn't always know what's going on. But hey, at least Sirius is alive. :-)

Chapter Two

"You ready to go?" Sirius said, poking his head through Harry's door.

Harry yelped, yanking up his shorts and snatching for his jeans.
"Sirius, get out!"

"What, we're all guys here."

"Except the girl downstairs!" Harry hissed.

"Please tell me you didn't invite your girlfriend along for this."

"Tonks is here, you retard. Didn't you hear Remus say that he and she were assigned to follow that Yaxley bloke tonight?"

"Oh. Thought that was tomorrow," Sirius answered, unconcerned.

"Could you please shut the door until I get my pants all the way on?"

"Sure," he smirked, retreating and closing the door softly. Harry could hear him sauntering down the stairs and was sure he was going to be relating exactly what happened. He briefly considered going out the window and Flooing to Hogwarts from the Leaky Cauldron, just to avoid the teasing, but he couldn't exactly do this without Sirius. And it had been an awfully long time in coming. Research, a ghastly number of firecalls to get permission, and more research. But they finally had the procedure right and Harry felt right about doing it.

Harry went downstairs calmly, only to find Sirius standing in the hall, turning to face him with a finger on his lips. Harry raised his eyebrows in question, but Sirius just jerked his head toward the kitchen door.

"No, that won't be necessary," Remus said, obviously answering a question.

"Are you sure?" came Tonks' voice.

"Yes, of course, I'm quite practiced with Disillusionment Charms."

“Ah, yes, all that . . . experience.” Her voice sounded teasing, and it had the hint of an already long familiar joke.

“If you poke fun at my age again, I shall simply leave you to your own devices,” Remus declared loftily, and Harry could just picture the private little smile he wore.

“I would never!” Tonks gasped with faked horror. “When I said that gray was an attractive colour on you, I was talking about your jumper! You know, like that time you said purple after the solstice was just in bad taste, I knew you were talking about Sirius’ horrid jacket, not me.”

They had both dissolved into laughter.

Sirius grimaced at Harry, but Harry was grinning. “By God, they’re flirting,” he whispered.

“That’s flirting?” Sirius muttered, but then he was smiling, too. “Best of luck, Remus,” he added before he cleared his throat and walked forward with obvious footsteps. Harry followed him. “We’re leaving now.”

“Oh, us, too,” Tonks said, looking entirely sober now.

Remus was maintaining a dignified aura. “We both ought to be back within two hours, yes? Everyone knows the plan if someone isn’t?”

They all nodded and agreed, then Sirius headed for the hall again.

“We’re just Flooing. You kids have fun.”

“Fun? Tailing that ape Yaxley?” Tonks snorted.

“I’m sure you’ll find a way,” Harry murmured, mostly to himself, but he wasn’t really amused by the budding romance, he was thinking about his own plans. He wasn’t looking forward to his own job for the night. He’d much rather be running around under a charm trying not to get caught by the Death Eaters he was spying on. He was going to be involved in very risky magic and most likely get in a fight, only without

the benefit of it including a pretty girl or doing anything positive for the Order.

He let Sirius go through first, to scope things out and make sure Harry wasn't going to get hexed the minute he stepped through, then he threw down some powder and declared his destination as Dumbledore's office. With a swirling rush of air and noise, he was there. He coughed, brushed ash from his shoulders, and looked around.

Everyone was seated calmly and quietly, so that was good. He met Draco's eyes and nodded.

"You ready?"

Draco looked a bit ill, but at least he looked like Draco. He'd been at the school half the afternoon, while Dumbledore explained to him the risks that were involved in what they were about to do (like the risks weren't obvious), so the Polyjuice had worn off.

"I was ready to do this months ago," Draco answered with a grim look.

"Tough. Told you I wouldn't until I talked to the other people in the DL and made sure they knew what was going on. Couldn't track down Colin until yesterday, as you know. They all say they don't mind anyone knowing they were part of it, and we're going to destroy that parchment Hermione spelled. So, let's do it."

"Wait," Draco said, licking his lips, and looking at Dumbledore, who was sitting at his desk with his usual aplomb. "You'll stop it if things go wrong?"

"That is why I am here, Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore answered, smiling with confidence. "I am certain they will go exactly as planned, however."

He was here to witness this as much as anything, Harry thought. He'd helped with the research to be sure no one would get killed, and now he wanted to see them go through with it so an impartial (well, sort of impartial) witness knew it was done.

“Then hurry up and do it,” Draco said, his face very pale and his eyes everywhere but on Harry as Harry stepped up to him and they resumed the positions they’d taken when they’d taken the Vow all those months ago. Sirius held out his wand and began to work the magic to remove it. Harry had wondered if it would feel any different when it was finished, or if it would just feel normal. A feeling of pressure began to build in him, and he began to worry. His eyes flicked to Dumbledore, but Dumbledore looked serene, so Harry tried to relax despite the feeling that he was a balloon being blown up. If it went wrong, would he just . . . pop?

When Sirius spoke the final incantation, the answer was obvious. Harry felt a sudden lessening of all that pressure, building in someplace he couldn’t define and gone just as quickly. Draco’s breath rushed out of him in a whoosh, and he looked shaken.

“Did it work?” he gasped.

“Test it out,” Dumbledore urged. “I am quite sure.”

Draco opened his mouth, closed it, and fidgeted. “Quite sure?”

Harry rolled his eyes. That seemed to give Draco the strength he needed.

“Last term, I entered into an Unbreakable Vow with Harry Potter,” Draco said, his words all a rush. Seeming surprised by his own statement, he hurried on. “It was forced on me, not something I wanted to do, but my only other option was a memory charm performed by an inexperienced blowhard—”

Sirius cleared his throat, but Harry just crossed his arms and gave Draco a flat look.

“I was sworn to secrecy concerning the actions of a group of students calling themselves the Defense League, or DL.” Here Draco paused. “Oh. I guess it worked.”

“Well, I don’t see you choking to death or anything,” Harry agreed.

Draco gave him a very grim smile. "This means you're not sworn to protect me from the rest of the DL anymore," he drawled. "Planning an ambush already, are you?"

"I'm not planning a thing," Harry said, impatient. "There, you're free. Run off and tell whoever you like. The DL is over with, now that Sirius is allowed to teach combative spells in class again." And now they arrived at the reason Harry had avoided Draco all summer, other than to let him have what little pride he could muster. "If this was all that was standing between you and going back to your father and Voldemort, it's not there now. You can."

Draco smirked. "Are you waiting for me to say that I'm going there right now, so you all can follow me and put a stop to it or something?" Harry sighed, uncrossing his arms and stepping toward the fireplace. He didn't want to fight. "I'm going home. See you when school starts, Draco." Then a thought struck him, and he turned back. "I will see you, I hope. If your father doesn't believe you, if Voldemort is there . . ."

"Your concern is touching," Draco sneered. "A very good act."

Harry held his temper. "Whatever. Do what you like, get yourself killed. You're right, I don't care. Because when people know the consequences of their choices going in, I don't feel bad when they get what was coming to them."

"Ever the sovereign ruler of moral conviction."

"Thought some of it might rub off on you," Harry muttered. "I see you're the same coward you've always been. See you if I see you, then."

Not willing to waste any more breath on the trading of insults, he went back to the house. It was quiet, and he suddenly wished Tonks and Remus were still there, harmlessly flirting in the kitchen. Instead, it was just Kreacher, cooking them dinner. Harry thought he should probably be extra polite to the house elf, since he'd be leaving for school soon and the elf would start sulking over being alone too much. But he just went upstairs without saying a word and began to survey

his room for dirty laundry. He had to start all the washing so he could pack his trunk. He, at least, planned to be there for the autumn term.

“Not purple, anyway,” Harry muttered, not taking his eyes off the mirror when he heard Tonks burst into laughter down in the kitchen. There was the sound of a dish shattering, but that didn’t draw too much attention, either. Tonks broke stuff all the time. “But something.”

He was staring at himself, wondering what he was going to do. The problem? He looked too much like a goody-two-shoes, too much like an Undersecretary-in-training. Nice haircut, well groomed, and of course his school uniform made him look very presentable. And he looked very unappealing to a huge number of people. All the people who were crying out for Fudge’s job, acting impressed by Harry’s life before England . . . not to mention all the students at his school who now knew who he was and were going to have a hard time taking him for who he was. It was all the stupid newspaper articles, the interviews with reporters, the meetings with the Minister, and so forth. Harry was being forced into politics, and he didn’t like it. Hated it, in fact. And people were going to start thinking of him as a politician instead of a fighter, and he was ready to do anything to divorce himself from that image.

His thoughts were revolving around his hair. Maybe he could grow it out into a mohawk or something, but he didn’t think that would impress anyone. But something rebellious-looking. It was probably Sirius’ fault, for making him dye his hair and grow it out all this time. He barely recognised himself like this, although he was happy to have his specs back and ditch the contact lenses. He met his own eyes in the mirror, happy to have his mother’s eyes but annoyed with all the people who thought he was his father come again. Sirius never treated him like that.

He started to grin. He was going to go to a Muggle hair salon, but first, he had to call Hermione. He wanted her help finding a potion or a spell that would make his hair just an inch or so longer.

Sirius strolled in. “Well, they’re off tailing Yaxley again. I tell you, Dumbledore doesn’t miss a thing, putting them together on patrol

three times in as many weeks. I hope he knows what he's doing, though. They might forget about those pesky Death Eaters."

Harry just smiled.

"What are you doing up here, anyway?"

"Figuring out a way to create a public image. I have to work with the Ministry, I don't have to be their poster boy."

Sirius' smile fell. "Oh, no. Don't do it, Harry."

"You don't even know what I'm going to do," he protested.

"You're right. That's why I'm nervous."

"Do you deny I need a public image? I've been in the newspaper all summer, and I need some way to prove I'm my own person, rather than my father or an extension of the Ministry. They're trying to make me into—"

"The Chosen One," Sirius finished for him.

Harry cringed. That little moniker had shown up in the papers just this week. It was the worst thing he'd ever heard. Chosen One? Please. The only one who had chosen him for anything was Voldemort, and he was getting pretty sick of Voldemort.

"I won't be what they want me to be, Sirius. You see why I have to do something obvious to prove I'm not it?"

"I see it, Harry," Sirius whispered. "I see it because I raised you and I love you. They're having a much harder time. So, yes, you have my permission. But nothing crazy. Please."

"It has to be simple and obvious."

"It does. Just do one thing for me? Ask Dumbledore's opinion?"

Harry snorted. "Not until he's ready to talk about the Horcruxes and the Deathly Hallows. He's pretending he doesn't know what I'm talking about and that he really will tell me his thoughts when he has more information."

Sirius frowned, but didn't have any new advice on that matter. "Just keep being who you are. He'll see that he can trust you with this stuff eventually."

"Eventually?" Harry repeated, eyes blazing. "We don't have that much time. I doubt we'll get another year before Voldemort goes from sneaking around doing household murder and starts touching off real battles."

Sirius held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "You're right. I'm not the one you need to convince."

"I know," Harry sighed. "Sorry. It's just everyone else in the country . . ."

He had three aprons, all washed by the service witch at the inn, and he handed them over to Mr. Fortescue silently, unable to conceal the relief in his face that it was over. The summer had driven him mad. People treating him like dirt just because he was wearing the apron, and him unable to say a word back because he was supposed to be fine with being treated like dirt. Taking the Polyjuice every hour, pretending it was some kind of treatment for an illness he supposedly had, and therefore being treated even worse by the other staff and the folks at the inn for being filthy and diseased. He'd hated this whole thing. Fortescue and Tom at the Leaky Cauldron were the only people who knew who he was, and they were happy to do Dumbledore a favour, and everyone else had ignored Draco unless they wanted something from him.

It wasn't fair. He was the son of Lucius Malfoy, they should have been bowing and scraping to him. But he wanted to live, so he pretended he deserved their scorn, feeling the million little slights driving into him like needles all while smiling and saying he'd be happy to serve them. And it wasn't like he deserved it anyway! He'd done the job asked of him, hadn't he? He'd been polite and

conscientious all summer! Was this just how people treated nobody wait staff all the time? What had any of them ever done to deserve it?

Except Fortescue. Fortescue had treated him with a modicum of respect, even deigned to tell him a few of the wild stories from his youth. And Tom, of course, who'd given him a discount for his room (his tiny, cramped, ugly room) because of how long he was staying there, and every once in a while brought up a butterbeer or an ale, "on the house" with a wink of shared secrets when it was the ale that he was still too young to drink. He supposed he could get Tom in a lot of trouble for serving it to him, if he wanted to.

He really wanted to leave, but instead he looked at Fortescue and said the words, the words that sat there bitter on his tongue, waiting to be expelled however reluctantly.

"Thank you."

For taking him. For treating him better than the others. For not trying to turn Draco in for a favour from his father. He didn't want to say it, he wanted to go on acting like he deserved it, but he'd spent the whole summer having it ground into him that he was nobody, now. Not to mention reading in the paper that his father was a traitor and slime, despite the fact that nobody had enough evidence to actually prove he was with the Dark Lord. Fortescue could have been treating him like a walking pile of rubbish, same as everyone else. So, he had to say thank you.

Fortescue just smiled, tucked the aprons under his arm, and said, "You're quite welcome, young man."

Draco parted ways with him with no other words spoken. He went back to the Leaky Cauldron and shrank his trunk, which contained all his worldly possessions, along with the new schoolbooks and supplies he'd had to hoard his meagre wages all summer to be able to purchase. He carried it downstairs to the smoky and nearly deserted room where he knew he'd find Tom. The hateful words had to be said for a second time.

"Ah, time to leave then, is it?" Tom said, a smile cracking open his wrinkled, craggy face.

"Yes."

"I've seen a great number of young people pass through here," Tom said in a quiet, just-you-and-me voice. "Going to fetch their school supplies, staying overnight before the train, all sorts of children with all sorts of dreams. You're one I'll remember, that's for sure. Can't have been easy, doing what you did. What you're doing now. Ain't that many who'll see it and recognise it, but it's taken a lot of strength. Dumbledore's a good man, that's sure, and it was good of him to get you set up. But it was you who saw it through, and that's something to be proud of. Good luck to you, sir."

Draco had to take a deep, calming breath before he could answer. "Thank you. For . . . well, thank you."

He rushed out of the place and hurried on his way to King's Cross Station. He'd taken his last dose of Polyjuice an hour ago, and he began to feel the effects creeping out of him, bleeding away the dark hair and spotty skin and skinny neck. He'd be himself, soon, and he stopped to put on the Invisibility Cloak that Dumbledore had loaned him before he continued entered the train station.

He hurried through the barrier and then pressed himself up against a pillar to wait. He'd be the last to board the Hogwarts Express, not wanting to get knocked into by any of the students milling around calling out greetings and trying to wrestle their luggage onto the train. He didn't want to reveal himself until he was on the train. He could have boarded under disguise, but he thought it might cause a bit of trouble if he suddenly transformed into himself right in the middle of a train compartment. Anyone who'd seen him over the summer would figure it out and possibly get Fortescue or Tom killed. He just didn't want to get ambushed before getting on the train, that was all. So he'd stay under the Cloak until the last possible moment.

He kept an eye out, wondering if his father would come down here to look for him. Or if he'd send someone to do it. Draco didn't know who they'd be, but he thought he'd know them if he saw them. Whether it

could be proved or not, his father was one of the Dark Lord's Death Eaters, so any one of them might come down here to wipe the smear off the family tree.

He tried to catch sight of Potter, wanting to see where he boarded so Draco could make a point of avoiding that part of the train. But the billowing steam kept hiding, revealing, and hiding again, so it was impossible. He didn't want to see him. He'd been dismissed. He'd had a strange, untrusting sort of a friendship with Evan Rivers, but Harry bloody Potter had broken the Vow and walked away, declaring that Draco was no longer worth it without having to say a word. He thought of Draco as a coward, as a weakling. And he'd decided to sever their ties and move on.

But Draco wasn't. Tom had as good as said so. He had made it through the summer. He wasn't dead and he hadn't dumped ice cream over anyone's head. He might not have chosen a side in this war, but that was because he was careful, not spineless. He had to be sure he was making the right choice, didn't he? He had hardly concerned himself with the ideologies at work. In his mind, it was a matter of choosing his father and the Dark Lord, or Dumbledore and Harry Potter.

The train would be leaving in half a minute, and there was the female Weasley only just squeezing onto the train, her hair an affront to the world if her tardiness wasn't already. Draco slipped onto the train. And he sought out the compartment containing Harry Potter. He wanted to see him. See if there was any sign that he'd given a single thought to Draco Malfoy since the moment he'd left Dumbledore's office. See if he recognised the struggle Draco had gone through, knowing he could have left Tom and Fortescue and gone to his father three weeks ago, and he hadn't done it.

He found him sitting with Neville Longbottom, the creepy Ravenclaw Luna, and two Hufflepuffs from the DL, named Hannah something and something Macmillan. They were all laughing and talking, old friends seeing one another after being apart. Potter looked ridiculous. He was sitting there with his hair done up in green-tipped spikes, assuring the others that in the Muggle world, the style would hardly even draw attention. Stupid Potter, who could get away with hair like

that and laugh with his friends like the whole bloody world wasn't looking to him to end a war. And Harry had his arm around a girl . . . Draco was stunned. It was Granger. Hermione Granger standing there beside him as though she didn't have a problem with his arm or his hair. And she looked fantastic.

Draco immediately looked away in disgust. She didn't, really. But she'd done something to her hair (though nothing quite so drastic as grow it out and make it half-black and half-green), smoothed it and pulled it back in a clip so that it fell in lustrous waves over her shoulders. Her usually pale face was flushed with colour, with spots of happy pink in her cheeks. And her smile, something that Draco had rarely seen in five years of sharing a classroom and dining room, was radiant. She was beautiful. Well, for a Mudblood. For Merlin's sake, of course he'd never noticed what she looked like, she was a Muggleborn, he didn't look at girls like her. But he couldn't help looking now. It was a strange transformation. Even when she'd shown up to that ball fourth year looking all done up, she was shy and skinny. Now she was beaming, and her thin frame had developed all those lovely curves . . .

"He did that to her," Draco muttered. The attention of an international Quidditch star had made her put on a pretty dress that only accentuated how awkward she really was. A scar-headed freak who'd run off and snuck back into the country like a coward had made her like this. How could he have seen all her potential, and brought it out? Draco hadn't thought there was anything to bring out, and he wouldn't have known how to do it if he had. Not that he'd have wanted to, not with Granger.

"We've got to get to the prefects' compartment for a quick meeting," the Hannah girl was saying, sounding apologetic. "Come on, Ernie."

"I'm, er, coming with you," Neville stammered out. They all looked at him in surprise. "I've been added on, they thought we could use a few more. There'll be a lot more hall patrols with the way things are . . . I saw Ginny a moment ago, she's got a badge now as well," he said, trying to change the subject.

“Excellent,” Ernie said, sounding a bit pompous as he clapped Neville on the back. “Nice to know we’ve got some well-trained prefects with us this year. I tell you, Riv— er, Potter, the DL was the best thing you could have done. We’re much better equipped this year.”

There was a few more quick laughs, promises to come back after the meeting, then the three prefects were bursting out into the hall. Draco jumped to the side, holding his breath even though his heart was hammering. Prefect! He was a prefect! Was he still? He still had the badge, and Dumbledore hadn’t said anything about it. He supposed he must be. Merlin, that meant he ought to be going down to the meeting as well. He shuddered a bit at the thought of standing in front of Blaise and Pansy and trying to explain where he’d been all summer. It had been hard enough explaining his constant sneaking off to supposedly spy on Evan Rivers all last year. They’d never understand. And Draco began to realise this was some kind of test from Dumbledore. Would he have the guts to show up?

He was angry, and jealous, and he was starting to bloody suffocate under this ridiculous cloak. He tore it off and walked briskly enough to almost catch up the others. They turned around at hearing his footsteps and looked shocked to see him coming.

“Hello, Draco,” Neville said cautiously. “Oh, that’s right, you’re a prefect, too.” He turned around, saying to all of them in general, “Come on, or we’ll be late.”

But Ernie Macmillan was just looking at him with narrow eyes. “Potter told us we were all able to speak freely about the DL now. Told You-Know-Who all about it yet?”

Draco snorted. “Your family been murdered yet? What do you think?”

And he strode ahead, putting them all behind him. Merlin, what did a wizard have to do to get a little trust around here? What exactly were they all waiting for him to do, take the Mark? That thing was more trouble than it was worth.

The prefect meeting was torture. No one looked at him. No one spoke to him. They all kept shooting little glances out of the corner of their

eyes, and looked like they were itching to ask him where he'd been, but no one did. Maybe they didn't care. He hadn't ratted out the DL, and he hadn't joined up too visibly for either side, so they didn't care. He was still going to be alone, while they all flocked around Potter and worshiped him and his silly green hair.

Didn't anyone in this entire world care? He could join Potter's side and just be some stupid little soldier, going around spouting high-flown ideals that he didn't believe. They'd just say how wonderful it was that he'd finally seen the light and tell him to get on with doing the same old boring things. And then he'd be stuck with Potter, that arrogant prat, and have to smile at his girlfriend, who'd been a frigid bitch until he came along, and pretend it was all fine.

But his father . . . his father would care. Father would be glad he'd returned. He'd have to pay with some information, to be sure. But honestly, why would he feel guilty about telling Father that the Weasleys and half these stupid prefects had met in secret to declare themselves against the Dark Lord? They were pretty openly against him, anyway. And he'd be able to report, at last. A year-long spying mission, complete. And it was as Father always said—the Dark Lord rewarded service. Draco could become great, if he went to that side. He'd be heaped with gratitude for what he could do, the way he was already a part of the inner circle, if he chose to be. He could strike blows that none of the adults could.

He would never get yelled at for serving the wrong flavour of ice cream. He'd be more than just one of several dozen students fawning over the Boy-Who-Lived. He could be somebody.

Not like Potter missed him, was it?

As Professor Snape was marching him toward the infirmary for some bruise cream for his eye (he seemed to think Draco wouldn't go if it was up to him and would let the black eye rest), he berated him for his conduct. He'd never take points off a Slytherin, if he could help it, but Draco did have a detention for getting into a fight in the common room. Draco suspected his annoyance mostly lay in the fact that it had degenerated to fists and Draco hadn't simply laid the seventh-

year out flat with his wand. Professor Snape apparently didn't know how good it felt to hit somebody who was having a go at you.

"Just lay off, would you?" Draco snapped, pulling away from his professor and Head of House.

Snape's eyes were glittering darkly with rage.

"I got into a fight about . . . stuff. And I'm tired of stuff," he said stiffly. "I'm tired of a lot of things." He clenched his jaw and said something he never thought he'd say to anyone, much less this man. "I need your help."

"I beg your pardon?" Professor Snape said in a soft, dangerous voice.

"I need to see my father."

Draco was well aware that Professor Snape could arrange that. Father had been positively gleeful about Snape's true allegiances, and he'd mentioned them once or twice or maybe twenty billion times. It seemed to amuse him to no end that Dumbledore had a triple-crossing spy right under his nose.

"I need your help getting out of the school tonight."

Snape looked like there were many things he wanted to say. There was a war going on behind those eyes of black ice. Draco wondered what he was thinking. He had to judge if Draco was serious, and if Draco was doing what he appeared to be doing. Of course he was! He wouldn't ask to see his father if he didn't mean it.

"You will follow curfew tonight and join the other students in bed at ten-thirty. At eleven, you will get up and come meet me in my classroom. I will escort you to your home. Understand that I will leave you there, and that it will be your father's responsibility to see you back to the school."

The if you survive the trip was unspoken, but seemed to be there. Professor Snape was not planning to be a witness to whatever would follow Draco's knock on the door, probably so he could honestly tell

the headmaster he didn't know what happened to their missing student. Draco tried not to shiver and show his fear. If Professor Snape was doubtful, then Father or even the Dark Lord must be even more furious than he'd believed. But why shouldn't they be? In their eyes, he'd gone back on his family and his upbringing and everything a pureblood should stand for. He'd have about twelve seconds to explain himself, or he'd be dead.

So he slipped out of the hospital wing moments after Professor Snape dropped him off there, wanting to have the black eye as his first bit of evidence that he wasn't off on a lark. It would give Father a moment of pause, at least. Snape didn't even say anything about it when Draco appeared in his classroom at precisely eleven o'clock that night. Draco assumed that Snape understood, and was grateful to hear that Father had been warned of his coming.

But when he stood outside the palatial home he'd grown up in, hearing the rustle of their prized white peacocks in the hedges, he could feel his pulse hammering in his throat and wondered if the professor could hear his heart. He wondered if the Dark Lord was here. If he was about to die.

Professor Snape left him at the door, leaving him with only a spare sentence that was no comfort at all:

"The Dark Lord will use Legilimency on you, and you cannot stop it."

Draco stood outside the doors for some time after Snape abandoned him there, pondering why he'd said that. Draco knew from listening to Father that Lord Voldemort did that from time to time. It was why they were so sure of Snape's true loyalties. Why would Snape have said that, like it was a warning? Draco wondered if Snape was questioning Draco's loyalties, wondering if he was here on some kind of Gryffindorish suicide mission to become a spy for his best friend Harry Potter. Draco tried a little self-analysis. What would Lord Voldemort find in him, if he cared to look?

Oh. Oh, no. The Dark Lord would see, and would be less than pleased, with his memories. Of having fun in the DL meetings. Of partnering with Potter or Weasley and working as a team against

another team of DL members. Of laughing. Flying with Potter and enjoying it. Of wondering if they were actually friends, instead of enemies keeping an eye on each other.

Had Snape seen it? That was why he'd given Draco the warning, surely. But what could Draco do about it? The professor had said that Draco couldn't stop it. But that didn't mean he couldn't avoid it, or dodge it, or something, did it? Perhaps it was possible to hide those things. Perhaps he could screen them, somehow. Hide them behind something else.

Draco focused all his energies on the bitter feelings of being forgotten by Potter and the awful summer he'd had. He focused on his jealousy, and his rage that he'd been forced into this. He'd been mistreated, and then Potter had the utter gall to offer protection, like he had any to give! Potter, strutting around like a hero, and Dumbledore, spouting off about Mudbloods being worth anything . . . there was nothing for him in their side. But serving the Dark Lord, that was what he wanted. He could reconcile with his family, and he could gain status and power, and he could serve his own beliefs. It would be great.

So he walked inside with confidence, and went to Father's study. He was stopped by the coldness in Lucius Malfoy's eyes, but he simply bent his head in submissiveness and began his story, just the way he had when he'd tested it out.

"Last term, I entered into an Unbreakable Vow with Harry Potter . . ."

He was smiling, but Draco knew better than to rise from his knees. He'd won his father over easily enough, and when he'd strutted into the Dark Lord's presence, he'd felt confident. Now he was shaking and staring up at the wizard in fear. Lord Voldemort had managed to humiliate him in seconds and terrify him in less than a minute. So he kept his posture bent and waited with trembling hands to be forgiven for his mistakes of the past year. Because he'd made them, made so many, it was just as the Dark Lord said, he'd been weak . . .

"I will not be weak again," he said, his voice hoarse. He'd screamed when he'd been subjected to his very first Cruciatus Curse—that had

been inflicted upon him for assuming his mission of spying on Potter without getting permission. "Please allow me to serve you."

"Oh, yes, you will serve me, young Malfoy," the cold voice said in amusement. Draco now knew where it was that Father had learned to speak that way. "You will call me your master yet."

"I do. I call you master."

How could he not? How could anyone stand up to this wizard? He was proud and powerful and inhuman and to not serve him was unthinkable. To not serve him was death. And Draco had been promised so much. He focused on that, to get past the fear he was feeling. Lord Voldemort had promised him so much if he was a good servant. The other Death Eaters would look up to him and obey him, and Draco would have a place close to the Dark Lord. The whole wizarding world would look to Draco with fear and love, if only Draco would serve the Dark Lord.

"But what will you do for me to prove yourself to me?" he mused, his red eyes glinting with some private humour.

"Whatever you ask, master."

Lucius was still there, looking caught in a trap. Was he wondering if Draco would be placed above him, eventually? He had been alternating between looking proud and looking a bit sick this whole time. He must be jealous. Had Lord Voldemort promised him so much? But Draco could do more for their lord. Draco was well-placed inside Hogwarts, with links to Dumbledore and Potter. Draco could serve him in ways that his father could not.

"Tell me this, young Draco. Will you kill Dumbledore for me?"

Draco wanted to fervently promise that he would. But he didn't. He looked up in surprise at the Dark Lord and found something in his shocking eyes that made him pause. This was a test. His true first test as a servant. His answer meant something. So he stopped to think. Why would he be asked to do something that no one could do?

“You want to punish my family for the ways they have failed you this summer,” Draco said quietly. “You know that I could never succeed, that I would almost certainly be caught or killed in the attempt. I am not experienced enough to do that.” He bowed his head, trying furiously to think. “Is that what you want from me?”

If it was, Draco would find a way out of this. He could leave, he would go somewhere. He wanted to serve, he wanted to become great. He didn’t want to die. If he’d wanted to die, he could have just kept doing what he had been doing until the Death Eaters were so angry with his rebellion that they came after him. He would have to disappear.

The Dark Lord laughed, and looked proud of him. “Since you are so eager to prove yourself, I will give you another task. You will find a way to get my Death Eaters into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

“I will?” Draco blurted out, and shivered in anticipation of pain.

“The wards that protect the school are old and strong, and impossible to break from the outside. I give you the task of finding a way from the inside.”

“You say they are old and strong. How can I . . .”

“You wish to serve me?” Lord Voldemort snapped, his eyes flaring. “You will find a way, or I will kill you myself, you insolent child!”

Draco ducked his head. “Yes, master, I will find a way . . .” he mumbled, closing his eyes and trying to breathe. He was not going to die, he was not going to die. He would do this. He might not have the least idea now, but he would find a way.

“Then it is time to declare yourself as my servant, Draco.” He had somehow conjured warmth into his unsettling voice, which was almost worse than the coldness. “You will now take my Mark.”

Draco froze. Even his shaking stopped. “The Dark Mark?”

“You will take it now, to prove to me that you are ready to be my servant. You are not one of my Death Eaters if you do not wear my Mark with pride. Stand up.”

Draco stood up, feeling as though he were moving through water. The world felt slow and dull. He was going to have to do this. He didn't think he would leave here unharmed if he did not allow Lord Voldemort to burn the symbol into him. He wanted to leave here unharmed. He held his arm out, grateful to see that he was able to hold it steady. He didn't want this. He didn't want this, but he didn't have a choice. And one day, having this Mark would garner him favours that no others could have. It would be worth it.

It hurt. It hurt like fire, and it hurt like ice, and it hurt to the point that he couldn't feel it anymore. When it was finished, he cradled his arm to his side, numb and disbelieving. The snake coiling from the skull, there on his arm. A way for the Dark Lord to call Draco to his side, a way for him to call Draco his own. There was no way for him to go back, now. So he let himself begin to shake again. It was over, and he couldn't control his adrenaline anymore.

The Dark Lord—his true master now—didn't look as pleased as he ought to. “You have explained to me already that you waited until your school term began to come to me because it would create less suspicion. That our enemies would not be watching. But I see another reason in your mind that gives me concern.”

Draco held his breath, squeezing the Mark on his arm and trying to quell the pain.

“I have seen you call that Potter brat ‘friend,’” he spat. “Friend!”

Draco summoned up all the anger he could find under his fear, and held it in the front of his mind, bolstered by his awe of the wizard before him. “I once, briefly, called a boy named Rivers friend. I call Potter nothing. He is nothing to me.”

Lord Voldemort cocked his head in a very disconcerting way, and slowly smiled. “I can see that you mean that. That is good to hear.” His smile slipped away. “But your loyalty was to him before it was to

me, and that will not go unpunished. It cannot. You understand that, don't you, Draco?"

Draco almost stepped back, but he stopped himself in time. Trying to retreat would only get him worse. Lord Voldemort raised his wand and began to speak.

Draco screamed.

Chapter Three

"What would you have me do?" Severus asked in a hollow voice.

Dumbledore looked stunned by the information Severus had presented him with. That Draco Malfoy had defected back to his father and been asked to bring down Hogwarts was not altogether surprising, of course, but the fact that Severus had been given an even more odious task had taken him off-guard entirely.

"It is no great matter, is it?" Dumbledore said slowly.

Severus felt a burning fury that the man could so casually dismiss his own life, and Severus', that way. "No matter?" he choked out.

"You have already informed me of the limited time that remains to me, due to the curse. You are certain he wishes you to wait until the boy is successful?"

Not exactly. Wasn't the man listening? "He wishes me to be a useful spy as long as possible. If I can engineer your death during a Death Eater attack on the school, there will be no one to say who did it, and I can remain in my current position. But that is only the most convenient way of doing it. He does not truly expect Draco to have any success at all, and he has told me that I must bring about your death by the end of the school year either way."

"So he plans to deal the master blow this very next spring," Dumbledore mused. "He plans to assume a role of true power, public power, at that time?"

"That would seem to be his intention," he drawled, hoping the man would hear his impatience and explain what he was thinking.

"Then I have little time to waste. Severus . . . you will do as he says. If he is to reach his goals, you are the only one I can trust to stand between him and the students at this school. If I am not here, it must be you who assists Harry, who helps him ensure that his mother's sacrifice was not in vain."

Severus almost choked, but he was too good at schooling his features, tempering his responses. How dare Dumbledore even talk about her, talk about what she'd sacrificed? What was it to him? He loved the boy no more than Severus did! And now he was suggesting that the only solution to this situation was to carry out the Dark Lord's command? To stand between him and the school . . . Severus had known it might come to that, given how much Dumbledore loved Hogwarts. But Harry was a relatively new part of the equation. Severus was willing to help, but he didn't like that heavy-handed mention of Lily as though he would have refused, otherwise.

But what Dumbledore was suggesting . . . "So you wish me to kill you," he stated, feeling numb. It seemed that his whole life was about death, that it had always been and would always be meant for nothing but causing pain, bringing about suffering and murder. And now this man, this man of all people, was asking him for this.

"Severus," the man said gently. "We both know that it will happen anyway. Might I ask you the favour of helping me to avoid the worst of the pain, or the humiliation that would come if Voldemort made the request of another? Could you do that for me?"

No, he couldn't. It was bad enough, what he did to people he didn't know. The tasks he carried out, to stay in the position he held, so that he could do his part for the sake of the boy. He didn't think his soul could take the sheer weight of killing Albus Dumbledore, the man who had given him a life and a purpose in the wake of Lily's death. But it was Albus Dumbledore who was doing the asking.

He gritted his teeth. "If that is your wish."

"Thank you, Severus."

He said it so firmly, so calmly, as if he were totally sure of his chosen course of action, as if he sincerely meant the gratitude. Severus knew better than to doubt him, by now. He didn't lie. He avoided the truth when he thought it best, but he would not thank him for agreeing to this if he didn't feel gratitude. It was the only thing that kept Severus from breaking loose and screaming at the old man. This was the only

way, but he'd counted on Dumbledore to give him some sense of hope.

"Would you please send word to Harry that I wish to see him? I have some things to discuss with him, as well."

He'd been ignoring the summons from Dumbledore for two days already. If he ignored it any longer, the headmaster would come looking for him, and the whole school would see him brought to heel like a disobedient dog. He hadn't wanted them to see him ask "how high?" when Dumbledore said jump, but it might be worse if Dumbledore had to come get him. So after dinner, when the Gryffindor students went upstairs to work on essays and notes, Harry dropped a kiss on Hermione's cheek and told her he'd see her later.

"I don't really know what this is about, so don't wait up for me," he said with a grimace.

She frowned. "You don't think you're in trouble, do you?"

They were halted at the foot of the stairs, and they were in the way of the other students.

"Oy! Just because you're the Chosen One don't mean you can be blocking the stairs!" a stocky-looking fifth-year shouted.

They moved over to the side, Harry chuckling.

"At least somebody's not taking it too seriously. I think that's probably what Dumbledore wants to talk about, anyway. How the students are taking it, and everything."

"They're taking it rather well, all things considered, aren't they?"

"Thanks to Ron," Harry agreed. He felt a burst of affection for Ron Weasley. The boy clearly knew what he believed, and with all the confidence his prefect status gave him, had declared loudly in the common room that whatever else he might be, Harry Potter had to be an improvement on You-Know-Who. Not only that, but they already

knew him, and liked him, and what did it matter if they hadn't known his real name? He was still going to kick arse on the Quidditch pitch, at least. Ron had then invited him to a game of chess on the table closest to the middle of the room, and Harry had sat down and played with the entire room looking on. The sight of him losing a game of chess to Ron Weasley (who was an incredibly fierce player) had seemed to break them of their awe and contempt. Things had been more normal after that.

"I'd better go," he said to Hermione regretfully. He didn't try to kiss her cheek again. If he tried to push his luck, it would be three steps back for the one they'd taken forward. He jogged up the stairs to Dumbledore's office, grateful for all the running he did. He wondered how Dumbledore, as old as he was, managed to make this trek several times a day. Maybe he went jogging, too? It would be just one of the many secrets the man kept, after all.

He knocked and was bade to enter, as per usual. He really wished he and Dumbledore could start meeting somewhere that didn't make him feel like they were on such an uneven footing. Dumbledore's office was his sanctuary, and he was most definitely the one in charge while they were in there. Of course, no where else would have nearly the same level of privacy or safety, so maybe Harry should just admit that the old man had a good reason to feel superior to him (wisdom, experience, power, responsibility for many lives, all that rot) and suck it up.

Dumbledore sat at his desk with his hands in his lap, looking casual, not as though he had brought Harry here for a reprimand. "Harry, it is good to see you, my boy."

Despite himself, Harry answered, "You, too, sir," and meant it. It was hard not to feel that way, when Dumbledore turned those twinkling eyes on you and smiled with such warmth. He was genuinely happy to see Harry, and Harry had no choice but to respond to the kindness the old man had for him. He sat down, feeling more comfortable. He wished he could learn how to do that, of all the tricks Dumbledore knew. He made a person feel confident and welcome. Harry wondered what the secret was to that one.

"Welcome back, Harry. It seems that ignoring Voldemort's overtures has had the intended effect."

Harry thought of Sirius, sitting in his classroom and trying to reconfigure his lesson plan so that less kids wound up in the infirmary. He was overwhelmed by his relief that Sirius was there.

"Yes, sir. Sirius is thrilled to have full control of his classroom this year, now that poor Umbridge has been so sadly disgraced."

Harry faked wiping away tears.

"I am glad to have him back. I might not have guessed it when he was young, but he is quite a good teacher."

"The only problem is that now I'll have to respond to Voldemort, or he'll think I'm not a man of my word," Harry joked. Actually, it was a worrisome idea. If Harry were to go out in public, not to the Ministry building, or to Hogwarts, but actually out somewhere that he would not be safe, maybe Voldemort would stop killing so many people just to get a rise out of him? The only way to end the killing would be to do something reckless that would get him caught by Death Eaters and brought before Voldemort, and he had things to do before he would be ready for that.

"We'll sort that out when it comes up, I guess," Harry sighed.

"Has your first week of classes gone well?" Dumbledore inquired politely.

Harry thought over it. "Yes, sir, I think it has."

"You must be feeling confident after having passed on your OWLs with such skill. I know that you had some concern you might have trouble catching up in the classes you had less experience with."

"I knew I would have to work hard, and I did. I was surprised by my affinity for runes, but Sirius tells me I'm too logical not to love them. I did less well with Professor Hagrid's class, but I'd like to think it's because I have no experience with animal handling, not problems

with the material. I was assured that I did very well on the written portion of the exam, despite my poor performance on the practical.”

“A small bite on your finger is hardly what I would deem a poor performance. You would not be the first wizard to incur an injury. Your marks seemed to be more than satisfactory.”

Harry grunted uncomfortably. Fifth-year exams should have been only too easy, in his mind. It shouldn’t have taken him so long to get to that level, and if he was as smart as he’d always thought he was, he should have gotten an Outstanding in every subject. He should have paid more attention during Professor Hagrid’s lessons or something.

“My dear boy, you mustn’t allow yourself to think that you can be perfect, even on something like year-end exams. It is not possible. Not only that, but dwelling on something that is now behind you will lead to nothing more or less than regret. Regret is a tool, but a dangerous one that must be treated with caution.”

Harry was startled, and cocked his head to one side. “I’m surprised to hear you say that,” he admitted.

“Are you?”

“I was sure you were about to tell me that regret was useless and it was much better to dwell on the future.”

“Were you one of my younger students, I may have done so,” Dumbledore said soberly. “But I am certain you are old enough to know by now that past regrets can lead to more cautious and wiser decisions for a person’s future.”

Harry thought of the lessons he’d learned from the girls he’d known, and thought of Hermione, and smiled. “I think I’ve figured that out, yes. But what do you mean, that it is dangerous?”

Dumbledore’s hands twitched, but remained in his lap. Harry wondered why. Wouldn’t he usually have them steepled on his desk by now? He’d just been about to do that very thing, but instead he

was keeping his hands hidden. Perhaps he was holding something he meant to show Harry later. Harry would wait until Dumbledore broached the subject.

“Regret can lead to bitterness rather than wisdom, Harry. And it is such an easy path to walk down. It takes a person of great self-awareness, one with a true and genuine desire to better himself, to wield a weapon such as regret with effectiveness. More often, it leads to anger, and isolation.”

“If you’re telling me that by being disappointed with my performance on the Care of Magical Creatures practical, I am in danger of becoming Professor Snape . . .” Harry said dryly.

Dumbledore chuckled at that. “That might be an overexaggeration of my point. But it is never too early to learn a lesson that you might need later in life. There are many things I know now that I wish I had been told as a young man.”

“But would you have listened then?” Harry countered.

Dumbledore continued to smile. “Perhaps not. Young men are not always eager to listen to the advice of someone whom they feel is not in touch with their generation.”

Harry grinned at that. “So you’re worried that I’m not going to listen to you because of my hair?” He ran his hands through it, feeling like it had accomplished its aim. “I believe that you have a lot of wisdom I could benefit from, sir. This was just one of those tools you’re talking about.”

“Might I ask what reaction you have had so far?”

Harry knew that Dumbledore likely knew most of it by now. “Well, I’ve been called everything from Broccoli or Asparagus to Scarface to Chosen Prat around here. The papers have begun to refer to me as Rebel Without a Cause, but then there was that other thing they said. That I have my own mind rather than being an extension of yourself or the Ministry, and that I may actually be the last best hope for our

world. That kind of made the whole thing worthwhile, since that was the goal.”

“In hindsight, I think you probably made a good decision, so long as you can live with what you see in the mirror,” Dumbledore said, not smiling at all now. “I was, however, very surprised when I was asked my opinion of your dramatic change and I did not know to what they referred.”

Harry gave him a grim look. “Oh, I am sorry about not informing you. I just thought that since you weren’t very big on communication anyway, you wouldn’t want to be bothered.”

Dumbledore knew what he meant, and he wasn’t happy. He’d been pretending that he wasn’t holding anything back from Harry, but Harry knew better. What made him most unhappy about the whole situation was that Horcruxes were only a very small part of the vast store of things Dumbledore knew about magic and the wizarding world, and he wasn’t sharing any of them. He would probably trust it all to Neville, but Neville didn’t have the right mind for it. He wasn’t a scholar, he didn’t love knowledge, he had no real ambition outside of defeating Voldemort. But he, Harry . . . why shouldn’t Dumbledore want to teach him some of the many things he knew? Especially this topic, which was such an integral part of what he believed Harry was meant to do.

Harry went on before Dumbledore had composed what he might say.

“What’s wrong with your hands, sir?”

“My hands?” Dumbledore asked innocently.

“Yes, sir. Your hands. You haven’t moved them this whole night, and there were about three places in this conversation when you’d normally have put them on your desk. You can’t have thought I wouldn’t notice.”

Dumbledore gave Harry a brief, sad smile. “No, I shouldn’t have thought you wouldn’t. You are remarkably observant, sometimes.”

Harry was surprised and concerned by the tone of Dumbledore's voice. "Headmaster? What is it? May I see?"

Dumbledore put his hands on the desk, and shook the cuffs of his sleeves back. One was the same unmarked but rather wrinkled old hand, but the other . . . it was black and burned and dead-looking.

"Sir— Merlin. What happened?"

Dumbledore offered another sad smile. "I made a regrettable mistake, Harry."

The choice of words was not an accident, Harry understood. He'd brought back up regret on purpose. He'd done something with one of the Horcruxes that had caused this. Things suddenly made more sense. His caution with Harry was only because he didn't trust himself, either.

"Sir?"

"I was foolish enough to think I was stronger than I was, and wiser than I was. It has cost me dearly."

"But Madam Pomfrey could— or maybe Sirius or Professor Snape would be able to help. You don't have to lose your hand permanently, do you?"

"I am afraid that I will lose rather a great deal more than that, before it is over," he murmured. "Harry, I must trust you with the information that I have been reluctant to share thus far, because I will need your help."

Harry was stunned. He tried to think. Why would it be Harry, rather than someone else, someone he had known longer? Was there no one else? No, likely not. The only other person that Harry could think of would be Professor Snape, and he unfortunately shared Dumbledore's caution about letting Snape in on all the information about Horcruxes. If for no other reason, than because there might be a day that Snape's mental defenses failed, and it would be nice if Voldemort did not discover on that day that they were on to him.

“Sir . . . you can trust me. You can count on me. I am just as upset as you by what Voldemort is trying to do, this immortality he is trying to achieve, and I am just as interested in putting an end to it. It’s unnatural. It’s evil. But I’m very confused about your deciding to trust me with it. Why now? Why have you suddenly decided that it’s got to be this way, when you’ve been fighting me about it?”

He hadn’t meant to sound like a scared kid, but that hand looked nasty and Dumbledore looked sad, and he didn’t like the danger that Horcruxes suddenly posed in his mind. Up till now, they’d just been objects, despite the scars the diary had left on Neville. Obviously, they were something a bit more than that.

Harry found himself clenching his own hands together painfully. “Please sir, just the truth. I have to know, if I’m to help you. If I’m really going to face him, I have to know it all.” He was afraid that if he couldn’t get Dumbledore to speak tonight, he never would.

Dumbledore nodded tiredly. “I touched an object containing a powerful curse,” he said plainly. “Severus has contained the curse to my hand, for now. He assures me that even his skills will not contain it forever.”

Harry nearly jumped out of his seat, and had to fight for control. “Sir. You’re not—you don’t mean that it’s going to kill you?”

“Eventually, yes. I will simply continue to hope that matters will be resolved by that time.” He seemed to be bolstered by the look of shock and fear on Harry’s face. “Don’t worry, my boy. I will fight it for every moment that I can spend working against Voldemort. I have not even come close to giving up yet.”

“You aren’t afraid?” Harry blurted out.

Dumbledore met his eyes squarely. “A person should never fear death, Harry. That is the mistake that Voldemort makes, and one which you must never make yourself. Death is nothing more than going to sleep after a very long day, and waking up in the midst of a wonderful new adventure.”

“An adventure?” Harry said, trying not to sound derisive. “I could almost believe that it’s like going to sleep, but that seems a bit too hopeful. Like a pep talk to keep yourself from being afraid.”

“Perhaps I should put it this way, then: we have very few guarantees in this world, but that we will die is one of them. It has always made more sense to me to believe that what will come after is something to look forward to, rather than to fear. If we all must go there, just as we all must be born here, it can’t be so bad, can it?”

At that, Harry smiled, and felt better. Dumbledore seemed completely sincere. He really did believe that. He really did have that assurance. Whether or not Harry might fear death, he hadn’t really decided for himself. But it helped, to know that someone who had seen as much as this man considered it that way.

“But aren’t you in pain? It looks pretty bad.”

Dumbledore carefully shook his sleeve over his hand again. “I could tell you that I am not. But you will realise the truth eventually, and you, Harry, do not strike me as the sort of person who appreciates a comforting lie.”

Then he was in pain, and it would likely get worse over time. That didn’t sound like the sort of death that Dumbledore was talking about. “Then how can you call it going to sleep?”

Dumbledore was smiling again, with that calm assuring way he had, and it made Harry mad because he knew he was being an aggravatingly curious little boy and stirring up something Dumbledore likely didn’t want to talk about, and yet Dumbledore still made him feel as though there was nothing more important than Harry’s question. “When you become as old as I have managed to do, there are many little pains you experience and they stop seeming so important. And when you have lived so long, the chance to lay down your head and rest becomes very attractive, enough so that a little pain is a small price to pay for it. For some people, there is no pain in their passage, but for others there is a great deal. I have seen quite a few people who were murdered, and I would not judge by them. But I have also

seen several people die quite naturally, in pain or out of it, and I can tell you that all of them let go of their last breath with a smile.”

Harry tried to remember if anyone he knew had died. The only people he could think of were the two he’d learned of through his scar dreams— Two Rivers and Buster. He tried to imagine what they would have said about it. Two Rivers would have told him that death was just as much a part of the natural order as life was; death could not be feared because it was all part of the same whole. Buster would have said that death was a total mystery, the way everything else was, and that he hoped it would totally blow his mind. It was comforting, in a way, to think of what they would say. In their own way, they’d had a lot of influence on him. Two old men who’d seen much of what the world had to offer and still believed it was beautiful—just like Dumbledore.

“I hope that when I’m old, I can teach kids to love life enough not to fear the end of it,” Harry said quietly. “I hope my life will make that much sense to me later on.”

“And it is my sincerest wish that you will always feel that way,” Dumbledore replied. “There is so much that you can offer the world, Harry. I hope that you will always be that generous.”

“The pain will get worse, won’t it?” Harry muttered. “You’re going to be in awful pain when you die.”

“It is not going to happen for a long time,” Dumbledore said gently. “Severus and I will both work very hard to be sure of that. But when it does come . . . I do admit that I worry I will lose some dignity at the end. But there is a way to avoid that, one that I am not sure you could understand—”

“Sir. Please. I don’t— I don’t know if it’s right for me to say this. I don’t know if you’ll appreciate it at all, or if you’ll be upset with me, but— well, I have a lot of respect for you, sir. I hope you know that. And I really can’t stand the thought that people might see you in pain and think less of you for it. Professor, I just . . . I won’t let that happen to you. If I can do anything, to make sure that people don’t see you like that, then I’ll do it.” Harry found that completing his thought took away

some of his embarrassment, and he ceased to stammer. The man in front of him was one he respected immensely. He was not ashamed to admit mistakes, and to continue to learn and grow, at his age, just as he expected the youths under his charge to do. Harry didn't think he would meet too many people in his life like Dumbledore. "I'll do it, whatever it is," he said firmly. "You deserve that."

He was still afraid that it was not his place to say such a thing, but there was no one else, was there? Dumbledore was being forced to trust him, just as he'd said. Harry could do this much in return for Dumbledore's help in escaping the trap he was caught in.

Dumbledore looked surprised, and touched, and even maybe the slightest bit teary-eyed. "I did not know you felt that way, Harry. I am very touched by what you've said, for I know it came from your heart."

Harry was embarrassed again, now. And he felt a squeezing in his chest at the thought of the loss of Dumbledore, of how much the world would no longer have when he was gone.

"Sir. I've heard that you speak Mermish, and Gobledegook."

"I do, among other things."

"And that you have the respect of the centaurs. I know that you made a lot of advances in the magical sciences, discovering all twelve uses of dragon's blood, and all that. And . . . you know so many things. You know how to make people listen to you, and you know the history of this school, and you probably know why Voldemort is such a git."

Dumbledore folded his hands in his lap, which seemed to be his new gesture now that he had to hide one of them.

Harry took a deep breath. "How much do you think you can teach me?"

"I am flattered, Harry."

"I'm serious. I want to learn everything you can teach me."

Dumbledore smiled a little. “You are a very driven young man.”

“I am.”

He stood up slowly and walked to a shelf of books, pulling down two thick tomes. “Shall we begin here?”

Harry glided through the school on nearly-silent feet. Argus Filch, the old caretaker, was directly down the corridor, it was well after-hours, and yet Harry strolled past him without a care in the world. Filch didn't notice. Harry felt a rush of thrill and—dare he say it?—power. He was untouchable, for the moment.

The castle looked different, by night. Lit only by the moon, with the people in the portraits snoring around him, it was eerie and unfamiliar. He was breathing light, quick breaths and walking with soft steps, the way that Miguel had taught him to sneak up on someone. Once he was out of Filch's sight, he relaxed a bit, but he tried to stay quiet. No telling if there might be a teacher awake at this hour.

He considered going to Sirius' office and Flooing home to see him, but it was too late at night. Sirius would be fast asleep by now. Remus was likely only just getting off work, he was working nights all week because they always gave him crap shifts after he took two days off “for medical reasons.” But he'd be tired, and Harry wanted to show Sirius first, anyway. Well, he'd probably show Hermione first thing in the morning, and Sirius right after that. Hermione would get all concerned and tell him not to get into too much trouble, but Sirius would think it was brilliant. He would feel the need to give him a similar warning about making trouble, but it wouldn't be all that sincere. He was still one of the Marauders at heart.

The cloak was warmer than he'd expected when he'd first felt the silky material between his fingers. He clutched it around him in the drafty corridor for warmth, and tried not to laugh at how free and clever he felt. He was invisible! It was an incredible feeling.

He marveled again that Dumbledore had kept the cloak so long for him. It had been collecting dust on a shelf for several years, but Dumbledore had told him only a couple of hours ago that he'd never

been able to pack it up or give it away. He had never felt that it was his possession to dispose of. It had been James Potter's, and so it belonged to Harry. It couldn't exactly be considered a gift, since it already belonged to him, but it still was a nice gesture that Dumbledore had given it to him tonight. It was like a final declaration of the faith he was extending to Harry, a symbol of the new trust he was placing in him. He believed that Harry would use his father's Invisibility Cloak for good things, just as he believed that Harry would use the information he was getting for good things.

He finally, regretfully, headed back to his dormitory to go to bed. Invisibility Cloak or not, he had classes in the morning, and he was in danger of abusing Dumbledore's trust if he used the cloak to cause mischief tonight. But when he did get into bed, he just tossed and turned and couldn't sleep.

Seven Horcruxes. Was it possible that there were so many? How would they find them all? Dumbledore said he had a plan, and they were going to discuss it at length soon. But Harry felt a little sick. It was a staggering task to undertake. Voldemort was going to continue doing what he did, without any thought of consequence, because he thought he was invincible. He thought he couldn't be punished for the crimes he committed. And what he had done to make himself that way . . . Dumbledore was right to keep it as secret as possible. It only made sense to share the information with Harry, over anyone else. Harry had asked, for one thing. For another, Voldemort was planning to kill Harry anyway, so they weren't risking any extra lives in making this attempt. It was a good business decision, if nothing else. Minimalise losses.

Except . . . Harry didn't want to die. That just wasn't in his game plan. He wanted to put a stop to Voldemort, bring him back down to the status of a mere mortal, and put him on trial for his crimes. Force him to see what he was and face the consequences of his actions. Nowhere in that plan did he see room for himself to die, nor for Voldemort to do so.

The problem, he thought as he fitfully turned over in bed yet again, was that Voldemort's followers didn't play fair any more than he did. You couldn't block the Killing Curse, and they were pretty free with

that one, weren't they? To track down the Horcruxes was going to be difficult. It would require all his efforts, all his patience, and everything Dumbledore could give him. Actually bringing Voldemort down? That would almost require him to take steps towards immortality, himself.

But dividing one's soul and placing it into something else by way of vicious murder . . . that was the wrong way to go about it. That was so very wrong. There had to be another way.

"If you can't sleep, O Chosen One, d'you mind at least being quiet?" Seamus croaked across the room.

Harry stilled his turning about and his sighing. He slipped out of bed and put the Invisibility Cloak on and left their room. He wished he could be flying, but he would never transform here at the school where anyone might figure it out. He wished he had a girlfriend he could go to in the night for a little TLC, but that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. That thing last year had been a one-time deal and his current girlfriend just wasn't up for it.

"No wonder Dumbledore spends half the night pacing his office," Harry muttered.

"If that's a student out of bed, I'll wake a professor," one of the portraits warned him.

He held his breath and glided on.

Did Dumbledore ever wish to be immortal? He seemed so comfortable with death, now that Harry was there to finish the fight. But how Harry was going to actually pull this off hadn't really come up in conversation yet. Maybe Dumbledore didn't know, either.

Chapter Four

Neville was lost in his thoughts.

His own mind was a familiar place for him. He'd spent most of his time with only his thoughts for company for a great deal of his life. It wasn't always comfortable; indeed, his own thoughts had been full of self-pity and self-loathing for several years. But a lot had changed last year. Last year, Neville's replacement had shown up and started the Defense League, and also convinced Neville to reconcile with his teacher and mentor. Neville had started to feel better about the idea that Harry Potter was the one with a destiny when he'd gotten to know him and realised he was as capable as any fifteen-year-old could be of such a task. Neville had been busy helping Harry teach the more inexperienced members of the DL, even going so far as to help them outside of the meetings when they needed more practice, and he'd felt free to see Dumbledore any time he wanted again. Now he'd been asked to be a prefect, as well, and those duties took the place of the DL.

His mind was familiar, but he hadn't spent much time there recently. He'd been busy. He had friends, now. Real ones. Perhaps it was only natural, because they were all prefects, but he'd begun to spend a lot of time with Ron, Ginny, Parvati, and Ernie and Hannah as well. Of course, he wasn't friendly with all the prefects. There were Draco, Blaise, Pansy, and Veronica to consider; the Slytherin prefects were a frightening lot. He sort of felt bad about things with Draco, seeing as he was, technically, a member of the DL. But he'd chosen his own path, and it didn't include anything to do with Neville. He was trying to make good with his own house now, and seemed to be gaining status there.

Neville supposed he ought to count Harry and Hermione in with his friends, despite how much they seemed to keep to themselves. They were so close to one another that they seemed almost self-sufficient. And yet they were always happy to see him, to talk to him, to study with him. Self-sufficient, but not aloof or unapproachable.

Neville had a good life now, even if he hadn't stopped worrying about his role in the struggle against Voldemort. What had him trapped in

his mind today was thoughts of the DL. Harry had shown no inclination to start it back up. When Neville had asked him about it privately, Harry had said that since his godfather could now teach without fear of reprisal, they didn't need the DL. He also didn't think he'd have time. Neville found it a sketchy sort of answer. While it was true that Professor Black (who still got called Professor Rivers several times a day by students trying to get used to the idea that their teacher was an infamous character) had much better lessons these days without Umbridge to restrain him, the class was only catching up to what the DL had done. The members of the DL had mastered a few basic non-verbal spells and a lot of the most effective combat spells last year, and they were ready for something more difficult. It was merely an excuse on Harry's part, and his claim that he simply didn't have time was suspicious. He'd managed to lead the DL and plan their lessons last year while simultaneously leading Gryffindor's Quidditch team to win the cup.

Harry was up to something. Neville knew for a fact that he'd begun making regular visits to see Dumbledore, which was the only reason he didn't push Harry for an answer. If it was any of Neville's business, Harry or Dumbledore would have told him. So Neville had to accept that Harry was doing something with Dumbledore that was strictly "Chosen One" stuff. But that still left the DL needing instruction—especially with the tense climate in the halls these days. The prefects had to be particularly capable of breaking up fights. Neville and Ron and Ernie had talked several times about how they might get Harry or even Professor Black to start the DL up again. They hadn't come up with a solution.

Neville thought he had one. He just didn't know how to go about it. Would everyone think he was crazy? Laugh at him? But they needed this. He had to try.

Harry hitched his bag up higher on his shoulder as he mounted the stairs to meet Hermione in the library. Their schedules weren't quite as similar as they had been last year, and the work was harder and took more time, so the two of them had to find time together where they could. Hermione had dropped Care of Magical Creatures, but Harry had thought he ought to continue with it because he wasn't as

comfortable as he'd like to be, and that meant they barely saw each other until dinner two days a week.

He heard angry voices on the landing above him. Alert, he shrugged off his bag and drew his wand before he paced up the rest of the staircase. He didn't want to appear too abruptly and alarm anyone, so he made sure his footfalls were loud enough to be heard. But whoever was up there wasn't listening for anyone approaching. It was a couple of bullies picking on a young girl, he thought.

"You aren't afraid of us, are you?" one of the boys laughed.

"We'd never hurt you, would we, Geoff?"

"Course not."

"But the Dark Lord, he goes after families like yours, that's all we're saying."

The girl was crying. "Leave me alone," she whispered. "Give me my bag." Harry recognized the voice of a girl in his own house, though he couldn't recall her name. She had a distinctive high pitch that he'd heard in the common room. He picked out the first spell he would use, if it came to wands, and prepared to defend her.

"Well, which is it? I could give you your bag, or I could leave you alone."

"You heard the girl," came a loud and commanding voice. "Give her back her stuff, and leave her alone."

Harry relaxed. Now there was an ally he could count on.

The bully boys laughed. "Or what, Macmillan?" one of them asked.

"Don't suppose you'd care about house points, would you?" Ernie asked thoughtfully.

"Can't take points if you can't speak," one of them said threateningly.

“Don’t go saying things you don’t mean,” yet another voice spoke up.

Harry halted there, hearing Ron’s voice. He decided not to make an appearance, unless for some reason Ernie and Ron couldn’t handle it. The less the “Chosen One” came rushing to the rescue, the better. He just waited. He wanted to see how much they’d really learned last year.

“Who says we don’t mean it?”

“I really hope you don’t mean it,” came yet another male voice.

“After all, we wouldn’t want to have to report this,” said a girl. “Although you’d probably find that a better alternative than us taking care of it ourselves.”

Harry almost laughed at the ensuing silence. He’d give anything to see the faces of the two bullies who now found themselves facing Ernie Macmillan, Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom, and Ginny Weasley together. He’d be willing to bet that Parvati and Hannah would be along any minute.

“Aw, come on,” one of the two bullies said at last. “We were just—”

“Langlock,” Neville said in a very mild voice. “We don’t like being lied to.”

“Look here,” Ron spoke up. “We know you were picking on the girl, and we know you’re not going to get in a fight with four prefects here in the middle of the hall. So let’s call it ten points from Slytherin and we all go on our way, all right?”

The bully who had not been silenced said, “Points for what? We weren’t doing anything!”

“You made a girl cry,” Ginny said in that low voice that meant danger to Harry only because he’d been on the receiving end of it a time or two. “You really shouldn’t do that.”

“I can—”

“Langlock,” Ron said in the same calm voice as Neville. “You were about to insult a girl, too, and we just can’t have that.”

“It’s really too bad that you’re having such a hard time with non-verbals in Black’s class,” Ernie said in a sympathetic-sounding voice. “Or I’m sure you’d have bested all four of us by now.”

“Ten points, and you’re lucky we don’t make it more,” Neville said. “Goodbye.”

A brief silence.

“You know, I think we’ll leave the spell on you for now, actually. Don’t worry, it’ll wear off on its own after a few minutes. Until then, I think your silence might do the school some good.”

“Ta ta,” Ginny added.

A moment later, footsteps retreated up another staircase, and the four remaining friends began to laugh, with a sort of letting go of nervous tension.

“Are you all right, Kimberly?” Ginny asked the younger girl.

“Yes, thank you,” she sniffled.

“That could have been much worse than it was,” Neville said.

“Ah, there’s no way they could have—or would have—done anything to all four of us,” Ginny said.

“But when it’s seventh-years?” Neville muttered.

“Good point, but until we have a solution to our problem, we just have to stay sharp,” Ernie said.

“Gin, let’s you and I take Kimberly here back to the common room in case those blokes are hanging around,” Ron suggested. “Ernie, you all right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Neville?”

“I’m headed downstairs, anyway, I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.”

They broke up, and when Neville descended, there was Harry standing in the middle of the stairs with his bag discarded behind him and amusement in his eyes. Neville paused for a second, surprised, then made a wry face and came down to meet Harry while Harry stooped to pick up his things and resheath his wand.

“Good work,” Harry said, trying not to laugh. “I wouldn’t much want to get into a fight with any of you, but the four of you together are pretty unstoppable.”

Neville was looking at him with a curious expression, and Harry stopped being amused.

“What is it?”

“Just thinking about what might have happened if it was older students. They’re Slytherin, and some of them have learned some pretty Dark spells that we’re going to have a tough time with.”

“This is about the DL again, isn’t it?” Harry asked, realising where Neville’s conversation was headed.

Neville’s face made it obvious.

“Listen, Neville, it’s not that I don’t see the need for it. But I really don’t have time. Dumbledore and I . . . we’re working on something. Something pretty important. Honestly, if there was anyone I’d feel comfortable telling about it, it would be you, but not here and not now.”

"I understand," Neville said with a serenity that surprised Harry. Only last year, he'd have been pretty upset about it.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. In truth, he might be able to find the time for once-weekly meetings. But he couldn't put the effort into it that the DL needed at this point, and someone else would be a better choice. There was only one person Harry could think of for the role, but he was waiting for him to realise it for himself.

"Really, Harry, don't apologise. I get that you have other responsibilities now. I was just wondering what you would think . . . I've been thinking about it a lot, thinking about who else might do it. And I wanted to see if it was okay with you, if, um, if I restarted the DL myself."

Neville was half-mumbling by the end, but Harry caught it. He laughed, and clapped Neville on the back.

"I've been hoping you'd figure it out," he grinned.

"What?"

"That you were capable of it. I can't think of anyone better, honestly. I was waiting for you to say something."

Neville was hilariously disconcerted by it. "So you wouldn't mind? I mean, it was your idea to begin with . . ."

Harry pulled from his pocket the item that he'd been keeping there for two weeks, waiting for Neville to make the offer. "Here," he said, flipping it to him.

Neville caught it. "A Galleon?"

"Hermione's charmed Galleon that changes all the other DL coins," Harry said.

"You keep it on you, even with the DL not meeting?"

"Just waiting to give it to you."

Neville clenched his hand around it possessively. "I know I can keep it going maybe until the end of the term, but after that, I'm going to need some help."

"Ask Sirius, and Dumbledore. They'll both have loads of ideas."

He'd have to suggest to Sirius that he sit down with Moody at one of the Order meetings to get some good input on what the DL might focus on. Of course, Sirius would probably figure that out all by himself.

"Oh, here," Harry said, handing over another Galleon. "I took Draco's back, so you don't have to worry about him."

Neville just looked at the coin in Harry's outstretched hand, and shook his head. "Keep it."

"Me? Why?"

"Just in case you find some time to come. Thought you might still want the practice even if you don't want to be in charge."

Harry put it back in his pocket gratefully. Neville knew better than any of the other students what it was like to be where he was right now. He would want the practice. Whether it helped or not, there was always that feeling that one more spell you could learn that meant the difference between surviving and not surviving. If he could hone himself just that little bit more . . .

"I'll come when I can," Harry promised. "See you later, Neville."

"All right, Harry."

"Neville? Thanks."

And without waiting for a response, he hurried up to the library for the study session he was now rather late for.

Harry finished describing what he'd seen (or rather, heard) on the stair landing to Hermione. She had insisted it wait until they were walking to the Gryffindor common room, so they could use their time in the library for actually studying.

"That's wonderful, for Neville. For everyone, I suppose."

"You're still going to go, aren't you, Hermione?" Harry asked her. This was the first it had occurred to him to wonder whether or not she would be involved in the DL if he wasn't.

She looked down. "I don't know. I'm already ahead by quite a bit—"

"I think you should," Harry said, discarding the idea of sarcastically remarking on her turning down the opportunity to study more.

"You do?"

"There's no way you can know too much about Defense, especially not now. I'm sure Neville will be asking you to teach him how to make more of the coins soon, he's going to have a lot more takers now that Voldemort is out in the open. I won't always be able to make it to the meetings, but you should go." He knew she still felt overwhelmed by the other students sometimes, but she needed to break away from him a little bit and stop expecting him to act as her go-between to the rest of the school.

Hermione didn't want to discuss it any more, that was obvious. She changed the subject. "I think the way the prefects handled that situation was brilliant. It's nice to see that Ron and Ginny can work together. How many fights did you break up between them last year?"

"A lot." He snorted. "The problem is that Ron needs to get laid and Ginny needs to stop doing it so often. There would be a marked improvement in their personalities."

Hermione slapped at his shoulder. "How can you say that about her? She doesn't just sleep around like that."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "If you say so."

“Besides, give Ron a little time, you know? Sixteen is pretty young, isn’t it? I mean, not counting you.” Then Hermione turned a suspicious face on him. “Just how many people have you, um, you know?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Six. I think.”

Hermione was startled. “You told me about that veela person when you were thirteen. And you said you had a girlfriend in Australia. Six?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, definitely six. Stephanie the Bulgarian veela, then another prostitute in Austria—which was a mistake, by the way—then we moved to Brisbane. I seem to remember two of the obligatory drunk college girls at the college parties, then Anna.”

“That’s only five,” Hermione said suspiciously. “Which means the sixth one is in England.”

Harry was turning very, very red. “I was going to tell you soon, so don’t be mad that you don’t know. I wasn’t trying to keep it from you.”

Hermione stopped, right in front of the portrait hole into Gryffindor. “It’s a student?”

Harry bit his lip, then straightened his shoulders. “This was last year, before you and I started dating.”

Hermione was livid. “Was it Ginny? I swear to you, Harry, if it was Ginny—”

“No, it wasn’t Ginny. With her, there were too many strings attached. I didn’t want to date Ginny, and she at least wants the guy to wine and dine her a little bit—”

That was the wrong thing to say, Harry. That was very much the wrong thing to say. There were bright red flashing warning signs in his head that told him he’d veered off into dangerous territory.

“So you just went with some girl who wasn’t worth the effort? Some cheap little—”

“No. No, I did not go for someone who was easy. I just wanted something simple, something with a girl who wasn’t looking for a relationship. And there was a girl who was willing for it to be just a one-time thing. But she was a really interesting girl, too. I didn’t want just any random girl, it wasn’t like that, I actually liked her.”

Not helping, Harry. This is not helping. Well, what was he supposed to say about this? He’d planned on just one day coming out with it. Just saying, Hermione, I slept with someone last year, and I wanted you to know about it because you’re my girlfriend and I want to be honest with you. That was all. He liked honesty. He was certainly not used to women who wanted an explanation for why he’d slept with someone or needed to know all the details about his past relationships. Were all normal girls like that?

Hermione was standing there with her arms crossed over her chest, looking more disgusted than he’d ever seen her look before. “Just tell me who it was.”

“Look, Hermione, I want to be a gentleman about it. It’s not that I wouldn’t tell you, it’s just that she doesn’t need a bunch of people pointing at her in the hallway or calling her the Chosen Floozy or something. We both approached this whole thing with a lot of respect for each other—in fact, she’s pretty much the only girl at this school who felt the way I did about it. I know I can trust you with it, but just think for a second . . . do you really want to know?”

“Yes, Harry, I really want to know.”

“It was Luna.”

“Luna Lovegood?” Hermione shrieked, making Harry wince. Oh, god, there were people coming down the hallway, and they had to have heard that. Why, oh, why couldn’t they be doing this somewhere else? “She’s not even . . . she’s weird-looking!”

"I told you, she's interesting and I like her. I should think it would be a point in my favour that I didn't just throw myself at some girl with huge tits, if I wanted that I'd have gone for Lavender Brown—"

"Next on your list, is she?" Hermione huffed.

"No, urgh," Harry said, shuddering, "I can't even carry on a conversation with her, she's got no brains in her head."

Hermione looked stricken, at that. "So, this, you and me, is all about the fact that I have brains in my head? You think I'm interesting and you want to have sex with me, and after you dump me, I suppose you'll go for Professor McGonagall?"

"You're being ridiculous," Harry said hotly. "Not to mention hurtful. I haven't done anything to make you think that."

"Except have six sexual partners by the age of sixteen."

"Oh, so what? How does that suddenly mean that we were never friends and all this time I've spent with you is just so I can get into your knickers? When have I ever acted that way?"

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Want, as you so eloquently put it, to get into my knickers?"

"Well, yeah, eventually. But I can wait. I've told you that. I don't mind that you're not ready for it. I have been totally faithful to you, for your information, because I knew it would be important to you. As soon as we started dating, I stopped thinking about other girls. I am telling you about Luna because you wanted to know, remember? Most of this happened before I even met you."

Hermione's face was streaked with tears, though she didn't really look like she was crying. She just looked lost. "And you didn't think even once that you might, one day, meet a girl who wasn't quite as

loose about sex as you? That the girl might feel just the tiniest bit inadequate?"

"Inadequate? Is that what all this is about?" Frustrated, Harry raked both hands through his hair. When he raised his arms, Hermione flinched. Harry forced himself to calm down a little bit. She had a reasonable fear of angry young men with a professed sexual attraction to her. He had to stay cool about this. "Hermione, how many times do I have to say it? You're my best friend as well as someone I feel romantic toward. You have ten times more of my heart than any of those girls did. And if I'd known back then how much it was going to upset the person I was serious about, I probably wouldn't have been quite as free as I was. I'm sorry this came up at such a bad moment. You should have been better prepared to hear it."

"It doesn't matter whether I was prepared," Hermione said, swiping at her damp cheeks. "Even if I knew what I was about to hear, it wouldn't change the fact that I'm not going to be able to make you happy. You can tell me all you want that you're willing to wait until I'm ready, but what if that's still years away? You're just not that kind of guy."

"I think you're selling me just a tad short, aren't you?" he asked angrily.

"And because you're not, you're never going to make me happy, either," she shot back. "We both have a lot of expectations that we can't meet for each other, and I think we should stop this now, before it gets worse. I can't remember the last time I was with you when I wasn't either crying or trying to help you save the world. I don't want that anymore."

"Hermione, stop. If you want me to back off, you can say that, but don't say you don't even want to talk to me anymore."

Hugging her arms around herself, she said, "I don't want to talk to you anymore."

Then she fled into the portrait hole and disappeared, leaving Harry standing out in the corridor wondering what point in that conversation he should have just bailed out on it and faked a complete memory loss or something. What exactly in hell had just happened?

“Witches,” Sirius grunted, sounding amused.

Harry lifted his head from his hands. “What?”

“Can’t live with them, can’t hex them,” he expounded.

“So you do have some idea what just happened to me?”

“Some idea, yeah,” Sirius said.

“Well?”

“It’s a classic technique that women employ, Harry. She’s obviously got something on her mind that she doesn’t know how to share with you, and she’s worked herself into thinking it’s vital to your relationship and you were five minutes from dumping her. She just wanted to beat you to the punch. It might just be that your rather sordid past scared her, and she was actually afraid that you expect more from her than you do, but it seems to me that she’s been doubting herself already for some reason.” Sirius gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Have you been pressuring her?”

“No.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if you had, you know, and now that I see what it’s led to, I’m really sorry that I was so lax when you were younger—”

“Sirius. No. I’ve done the meaningless sex thing, and Hermione is someone that I want to have a relationship with. How many times do I have to say it, for Merlin’s sake? I. Can. Wait. For. Her.”

Sirius shrugged. “Just had to ask.”

“Sirius, come on. What should I do?”

“Leave her alone.”

“No, really. I mean, is she wanting me to chase her, to prove she’s important to me, or something?”

“That very well may be. But I want you to listen to me, kiddo. I’m being dead serious, here.”

“Okay.”

“First of all, I think you ought to let that girl stand on her own for a while. She doesn’t have self-esteem like you’ve got, and just by being yourself, you make her feel inadequate. It doesn’t have as much to do with other women as she’d like you to believe. What she needs is some time on her own, to find out what she’s capable of.”

Harry fidgeted, knowing that he’d been thinking something similar right before their fight. “She’s going to find out she’s capable of a lot. She might not come back.”

Sirius nodded. “I know. That’s the other thing I want you to hear. If she doesn’t . . . Harry, it might be for the best. Take a good, hard look at the situation you’re in. Anyone around you, associated with you, is at the beginning of a dark time in their life. Me, Remus, people like us, we’re going to be afraid for our lives for a little while. Voldemort’s going to be coming after all of us because we’re close to you. You think really hard about whether or not you want Hermione to be involved in that.”

“She already made that choice,” Harry argued. “She said she knew it was dangerous and she wanted to be part of it.”

“I know that. But is that going to help you sleep at night, when she’s hurt or killed, that she knew it would be dangerous?”

Harry stared past his godfather into nothing. “No. No, if anything happened to Hermione—or to you, or anyone else I love—I’d feel . . . well, Remus told you how I was when you got hurt at the Ministry fight.”

“So you let her go, Harry,” Sirius said, a look of pain and regret on his face. “You let her walk away, and you don’t try to win her back. You let her walk right into safety that you can’t give her, however nominal it may be.”

Harry gaped at Sirius. “You’re talking about Catalina, aren’t you? Sirius, she wanted to stay together?”

“She wanted to come with me,” he said with a tiny, lost smile. “I walked away from her. That’s why we can’t try to find them, Harry, not just because of the danger. It’s because she was willing to risk it to stay with me and I told her no. I had to keep her safe, and to do that, I had to break her heart. She won’t want me to find her.”

Harry thought back to Catalina, to how happy she’d been with Sirius. Thinking about what it must have been like when Sirius refused to let her be with him, when he left her . . .

“You want me to do that to Hermione?”

“Harry, it won’t be quite like that. You guys are much younger, and she’s the one who is trying to distance herself from you right now. All I’m suggesting is that you ought to make sure she maintains that distance.”

Harry thought about what it would feel like if he had to tell Mr. and Mrs. Granger that their one and only child was dead because he’d been selfish and kept her at his side when it was the most dangerous time to be there. And he thought he could force himself to cause Hermione some pain of heart if it meant that she would live through this war.

“I’m sorry,” Harry muttered as he stood up.

“Sorry for what?” Sirius asked, rising from the other side of his desk.

“Making you talk about this stuff again.”

Sirius smiled. “I love you. If there is anything I have learned in my life that helps you, then it doesn’t matter to me if it’s hard to talk about.

I'm just glad that you made it to age sixteen and you still want to come talk to me."

"After all the places you've been and things you've seen? I'd have to be stupid not to want your advice," Harry said in surprise.

"That's another one of those things you don't seem to understand about people. Kids your age typically decide that it's the adults who are stupid and they're on their own trying to figure out the world with one another for advice."

Harry made a face. "The day I ask the guys in my dormitory for relationship advice is the day you'll see me disemboweled by an angry witch."

"Good to see you're not a total loss," Sirius teased. "Now then: I'm going home for the evening. You may feel free to mope about your break-up, but only after you complete your homework."

Harry shrugged. "It'll be a good distraction, anyway—and an excuse to stay away from everyone who's going to want to know what we were fighting about. Merlin, there'll be an article in the paper about it tomorrow, won't there?"

"Likely. Make sure they take the picture from your good side, would you?"

Harry playfully tossed an inkwell at Sirius as he ducked into the fireplace, but he arrested it with his wand and sent it back to the desk as Sirius waved goodbye.

The man's face had lost so much colour that it was nearly gray, and the quivering throughout his body was making even his lank hair shiver around his face. His eyes, impossibly wide, stared up at the figure before him, so lost in panic that he didn't even blink at the sweat dripping into them.

"Why are you doing this?" he said in a small, hoarse voice.

"You have a daughter, do you not, a thirteen-year-old whelp?"

“What does this have to do with Kimberly?”

“You are a Muggle,” the man looming over him hissed. A huge snake was coiling around his feet. “And you sent your Kimberly to school with pureblooded wizards and witches as though she were their equal. You had the audacity to assume she belonged there.”

“I don’t understand, sir, I’m sorry. It was that Professor at the school, he came and said Kimberly was special, they invited her to come—”

“They, too, shall be dealt with. Your precious daughter, too. But first, you.” And the man with gleaming red eyes smiled, as if in anticipation.

If Kimberly’s father had known what Voldemort would do, he might have screamed and begged for his life. But Kimberly’s father didn’t know. He died without a hint of a struggle.

Many miles away, Harry Potter woke up with a vague sense of disturbance. The only explanation he had for it was a feeling that the bullies, that afternoon, had taken something very important from the girl they were tormenting. He rolled over and went back to sleep.

Chapter Five

Harry normally enjoyed a long, hot shower after a brisk Saturday morning of running several kilometres and going through a grueling Quidditch practice. Today, he leapt in, got as clean as possible as fast as possible, and hurried out again, returning to his dormitory in Gryffindor Tower to finish his assigned reading. But as he hurried, he felt some satisfaction. Quidditch was going well. He had turned down the captaincy of the team so that Ron Weasley could have it, and Ron was turning out to be an excellent captain. His mind for strategy, his love of Quidditch, and the leadership role he'd been playing at the school as a prefect had combined to make him a powerhouse of energy and tactics that didn't want to hear if one of his teammates was tired or bored. That included his sister, who'd come back on this year as a Chaser and was doing much better in that position than she had as Seeker. Those hurt feelings, it seemed, were being healed.

Harry finished his reading while laying on his bed listening to Seamus snore. The boy did like to sleep in on the weekends, it was nearly noon. He finally woke when Harry got back up and dressed warmly for the chill of the late October day.

"Where you goin', Great One?" Seamus mumbled. He found it amusing to call Harry that, probably since Harry didn't.

"Just out," Harry said simply, wrapping a scarf around himself. He could tell Seamus, but why spoil the fun of everybody who'd want to gossip about it later? Besides, he didn't want to look like he was bragging. He was going to meet with Dumbledore, and Dumbledore never bragged.

As he worked his way downstairs, he had to endure yet more of the snide and false requests for his autograph (and a couple of actual requests for good measure), and it made him grumpy. Just because the media had got a picture of him shaking hands with the Minister outside of Fudge's office . . . The truth was too boring, so the paper had decided to speculate about why he was there. The truth was that Fudge simply wouldn't take Harry's refusal to dedicate a new wing for the hospital in writing, so Harry was forced to decline in person. Not only that, but he wasn't yet of age, so Sirius (not pictured) was in the

office as well doing his job as Harry's guardian. When Harry got as old as Dumbledore and got to be Chief Mugwump—whoops, Dumbledore'd had that title taken away last year, hadn't he?—well, if Harry ever did get there, he was going to outlaw speculation. He might just outlaw newspapers and magazines entirely.

At least it wasn't questions about his breakup with Hermione anymore . . . He'd spent the first days after that had made it into the media holding himself back from pinning people to the ground and choking the life out of them.

He met Dumbledore at their agreed-upon spot, a side door out of the castle that avoided the crowd of people around the main entrance and the door everyone used to get to the Quidditch pitch. He was wearing his usual robes, but he'd added a thick, dark blue cloak against the weather. He smiled when he saw Harry.

"Sorry if I'm late," Harry said quickly. "Everyone's trying their hand at comedy this morning."

"Then I shall refrain from making an attempt," Dumbledore said. "I would hate to think that my abilities as a comedian have caused us to miss our appointment." He said it as if Harry's problem were nothing much.

And, Harry supposed, it would be nothing to a guy who'd gotten that much media attention during his lifetime.

"I think I might have single-handedly saved Fudge's job by being pictured with him so often," Harry grumped. "He was about to get the sack and then I started showing up in all his pictures and they decided he could stay for a while."

"You may be right," Dumbledore said in a much more grave voice, surprising Harry. He didn't want to have saved Fudge's job. Fudge was an idiot. He really had to find a better way to avoid those meetings.

"Well, anyway," Harry said, gesturing toward the door, "shall we?"

“We shall,” Dumbledore said grandly, leading the way. “I trust that your time spent signing autographs did not bar you from completing your reading?”

“No, I did it. Would you like a comparative essay?”

“Essays are fine things for a large classroom,” Dumbledore declared. “But you, Harry, I would much rather carry on a discussion with.”

So they talked as they walked, about the speeches Harry had read, speeches of Adolf Hitler and Gellert Grindelwald. They talked about the similarities and differences he had found between them, and the philosophical implications of such similarities between a Muggle and a wizard. Harry had only figured out what Dumbledore was doing that very morning, and he couldn't help but be impressed. Not only was Harry being forced to see just how similar Muggles and wizards could be, he was getting a lesson in the extremes of power and control. And it was working. Harry was disgusted by the things he'd read, but he was taking ownership of the feelings he'd always had about the value of Muggles and Muggleborns.

Then they came to the lake, their destination, and walked to a certain tree that overhung a deep pool. Dumbledore crouched down and touched the tip of his wand to the water, sending out some brief spark. It was only a moment before a head rose above the water, and the merman's arm came out to grasp a branch of the tree to hold himself there. Harry could see his thick, powerful tail gently waving under the water.

Dumbledore greeted the merman with joy and spoke to him briefly. The merman looked at Harry and grinned, revealing his mossy teeth. Harry was overjoyed. He was a barbarian, to look at him, with his slimy skin and the fishbones tied into the tangled hair. But the words flowing off his tongue were liquid and graceful and as far as Harry could tell he was discussing with Dumbledore the current political position of the centaurs in the nearby forest.

Finally, Dumbledore beckoned to Harry. “Harry, this is Reed. Reed, may I present Harry Potter. Reed has been chosen among his people

as the best of them to guide you in your learning. He is a philosopher, of sorts, and a keeper of their songs and tales.”

Harry was impressed, and immediately made his first attempt to speak Mermish to an actual merman. He said he was happy to meet him. Actually what he was saying was much closer to, “encountering you in this place gives me a feeling like dappled sunlight falling through a peaceful forest of kelp.” Or that was what Harry had meant to say. He was informed that he had actually said, “encountering you in this place gives me a meal like dappled sunlight falling through an infected forest of eels.” Reed and Dumbledore had a good chuckle over that, but Harry didn’t get embarrassed. He was learning a language, and this was the only way he knew to do it.

He was content to listen to Reed and Dumbledore converse for a few moments, just enjoying the way the words rolled off their tongues. He was mentally making any number of corrections to his pronunciation. After only a few more minutes of conversation, Dumbledore held out his hand. Reed disappeared beneath the surface, but Dumbledore kept his hand there until Reed’s tail rose up and gently slapped against it. Apparently, that was a handshake. Reed resurfaced, and they made their goodbyes.

A farewell to a merman was “It is my wish that I see you again before the stars fall from the sky and boil us.” Slightly morbid, but hey, maybe that was what living under a cold lake did to you. Harry wasn’t sure if he was supposed to let Reed slap his tail against Harry’s hand, but after they had both said goodbye, Reed went under the water and didn’t reappear, so Harry assumed not.

“Well, Harry, now you have met a merman. What do you think?”

“He’s brilliant,” Harry said. “I was trying to listen, but you were speaking too fast. Did he say I was supposed to come back when the fish rise?”

“I’m glad you were able to follow at all, that was well done. What we have agreed on is that you will come back on Tuesdays at the time when the fish come to the surface of the lake, which in human terms is about five-thirty p.m. Reed will meet with you at that same place,

and you will practice what you have been learning during the week, from me and from your own studies.”

Harry nodded. “Okay. I’m going to learn it as fast as I can. Reed doesn’t look like a guy who’s easily impressed.”

“No, the merpeople are generally not. However, you have already impressed them a great deal simply by expressing interest in their language and culture. Few wizards, especially young wizards, do.”

Which was exactly why Mermish was the language Harry had wanted Dumbledore to coach him on. Practically anyone could teach Harry how to converse with Goblins, and learning the language of giants and trolls took about a week altogether. But Mermish was tricky and complicated, and Dumbledore was the only wizard Harry knew who spoke it.

“We have made a further agreement. After a month’s time, if Reed feels you have learned a sufficient portion of the language, he will invite you to take gillyweed and follow him into the lake to meet some of his clan. You will converse with them and be invited into at least one dwelling to see an example of their architecture and food. If all goes well, you will be invited to return.”

Harry was ecstatic. “That’s perfect! I can’t wait to see it for myself, but it’s even better that I’ll be surrounded by people speaking Mermish. I can’t really learn it until I can hear the native speakers talking to each other, you know. I have to get totally lost and try to work my way through it.”

Dumbledore seemed surprised. “That is the method known as learning by immersion, I believe. Since you are so meticulous in your life, I assumed that you would not be an adherent to that method.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s how I learned Portugese and German so quickly.” In his experience, learning a language was about diving in, embarrassing yourself, and getting over it so you could communicate. If he hadn’t done that, he never would have been able to do the grocery shopping or watch the telly. It helped that he’d had fluent

speakers of both those languages in his own home, but he didn't suppose he could ask Reed to come up to the castle for a while.

As they hurried back in through the same door they'd used to exit, Harry turned to Dumbledore with a grin.

"I hope that I see you again before the stars fall from the sky and boil the lake."

"As do I. One must always hope for the best," Dumbledore replied without returning the smile.

Shaking his head at the old man's sense of humour, Harry turned to go, but Dumbledore stopped Harry.

"Before we part company, I would like to bring up a topic you may not appreciate. I hope that you will bear with me for a moment and take this in the spirit in which it is intended."

Harry stilled, the smile remaining on his face, though it looked a little odd at this point.

"I wish to ask you about Miss Granger."

Harry's face twisted into a frown. "What about her?"

"I simply want to ask you if you are certain you have made the right decision."

"Sirius—"

"Sirius made his decision, and you are entitled to make a separate one. I cannot speak as to whether it was right for Sirius and his lady friend—"

"Fiancée," Harry muttered.

"His fiancée," Dumbledore corrected himself graciously, "because I did not know her or her feelings about their situation. I make no judgements on him. Nor, indeed, do I intend to make any judgements

on you. However, I have been keeping an eye on Miss Granger, and I have seen her lose some of the spark she has shown recently. Nor have I seen you truly happy, Harry. You told me of the argument you had, but I feel quite certain that she misses you and is hoping that you will seek her out."

Harry started to speak, but Dumbledore held up his hand, his one good hand.

"I am not making any suggestions, my boy. I do not wish to give advice on this matter. I am only asking you: are you sure that avoiding her is the best course of action? You do not have to answer to me, only to yourself. I want to be sure that you do not think your life must be lived alone, without friends. I just want you to think about it."

Harry sighed. "I will."

There they went their separate ways, and Harry was angry. His day had started out so well! His run had been brisk, his Quidditch practice had left him with all of Ron's enthusiasm for "smashing" the other teams, and then he'd gotten to meet Reed. He'd been totally looking forward to studying hard enough to get under the lake to meet Reed's people within a few weeks. Now his good mood had been ruined because Dumbledore thought he needed to bring up Hermione. And he'd promised to think about her, like all his spare thoughts weren't already going to her after he got done thinking about classes, lessons with Dumbledore, the DL meetings he made it to, meetings with goddamned Fudge, and everything else.

He trudged up the stairs with all the doubts he'd tried to put aside coming back to the forefront of his mind. Was he doing the right thing? Was it wrong of him to dismiss her acceptance of the danger? They'd been friends first, and that was what he missed. He didn't need a girlfriend to hold hands with and kiss in the hallways and make everyone else feel jealous. Ron and Parvati had that covered. Not having sex didn't kill anyone, though it came close. What he needed was the person who'd listened to every complaint he had about his role in this war, who respected his opinion about prophecy, whose matter-of-fact attitude about the danger versus what needed to be done calmed all his worries, whose sharp mind found the answers

he missed . . . That was Hermione, and no one else. He wanted her back, but couldn't justify to himself the danger it would put her in. If she chose it, fine, but he wouldn't put her there for his own selfish reasons. He'd go it alone.

It wasn't until he got to the common room that his day was really shot, though. As soon as he entered, he knew something was wrong. There was a comfort-huddle around the sofa nearest the fire, the kind that girls fell into when someone got broken up with. But this one was different. The faces he saw were pale and streaked with tears. And the girl in the middle of the huddle was Kimberly, the third-year girl who'd been rescued from bullies by the prefects a few weeks ago.

Harry saw Neville, and hurried over to him. He drew him back with a hand on his sleeve, away from the muttering crowd.

"What's happened?"

Neville shook his head, looking sick. "It's her father."

Harry's stomach lurched.

"What about him?"

"He lived alone, and he'd been laid off from his job. No one knew."

Feeling his mouth turn to cotton, Harry was afraid to ask, but Neville answered the unspoken question.

"A neighbour called the police and they found his body this morning, but they think he's been dead for almost three weeks. The Muggles are saying he had a heart attack or a stroke, but there's a Squib on the police force, and he said it was Avada Kedavra. They came after him because he's a Muggle."

Harry's stomach churned with illness, remembering the night, that strange night, when he'd woken from his sleep feeling as though the bullies had hurt Kimberly more than he'd thought. He knew people were dying, but this was the first time it had been shoved in his face like this, the first time he'd been acquainted with the victim.

Then Kimberly looked up, and met his eyes. Her face was wet with tears and her eyes were painfully red. There was so much sorrow and anger in her eyes, and all Harry could see was accusation. He should have done something. He should have stopped Voldemort by now, put an end to this before her father had become prey to this murderer. That was his job, and he wasn't doing it.

He broke eye contact with a ragged breath, and stumbled up the stairs, thanking Merlin that Seamus had finally decided to roll out of bed so that his room was empty. He lay down and breathed shallowly, trying not to throw up. He told himself that this wasn't his fault. He wasn't Voldemort. Voldemort didn't hate Muggles and Muggleborns just because Harry was around. He hadn't hurt Kimberly or her father. And it wasn't his job to stop Voldemort, either. He was sixteen years old, and it wasn't up to him to single-handedly destroy the Dark Lord.

But all he could think about was Kimberly's eyes. She'd looked lost. She'd never thought, none of them ever thought, that they would be next. And Harry could have done something. If he hadn't learned from Snape so well, blocked out so much of that connection just for his own peace of mind . . . he would have known, maybe would have been able to save Kimberly's father the way he'd saved Arthur Weasley. At the very least, he would have been able to make sure the man wouldn't have been laying dead in his home for weeks, undiscovered.

He'd never questioned that using Occlumency was the right thing to do. But now he lay there and wondered if he was doing anything right at all.

"No, Terry, hit him with it! He can take it! And if he can't, that's what Madam Pomfrey is for!"

Ernie looked slightly alarmed at that, but when Terry raised his wand again, Ernie just bounced on the balls of his feet and grinned. Neville turned his attention back to the girls he was trying to help. They were hopeless. It wasn't that they couldn't learn the spells or even use them properly. It was just that they couldn't bring themselves to use

the spells on one another. If they couldn't do that, they'd get no practice.

He saw Kimberly's pale face in the back of the group. He'd been cautious with her, since she was a third year, but she had so much pent-up emotion after finding out about her father yesterday that she'd flattened Katie Bell, so he'd let her join the more experienced students. The sight of her provoked him to be a little extra-harsh.

"Listen to me," he said to the girls. "This is not a club that meets for fun. This is a group that meets to train for battle. I know it's hard to hex your friends, but think about the alternative: you, facing an enemy, having never actually used any of the spells in your repertoire. You ought to know by now that Death Eaters play for keeps, so you need to have the discipline to do the same. Right?"

They nodded, wide-eyed.

"Ginny," Neville called to her, waving her over. She mostly paired up with Luna since Cho was the only girl he could safely pair Hermione with. Those four were the only girls who didn't hold back in practice. Luna seemed to think her opponents were interesting experiments as much as people, and Ginny and Cho were just intense with everything. Hermione was too volatile for a demonstration right now, with her emotional state. "Show them how it's done, would you?"

Ginny didn't even take a moment to prepare, just started slinging spells at him like she was in the fight of her life. Neville blocked, dodged, deflected, did everything he could to keep from getting hit. Her spells came so quickly that he had no time to counterattack, merely to keep from going down. And her spells were the dangerous kind, the ones that only the older students were learning, the ones who'd been in the DL last year. Neville leapt over a curse she aimed at his feet, then was caught completely off his guard when she threw out a Jelly-Legs Jinx. He hit the ground.

Smirking, she minced forward to finish him off.

"Stupefy!" Neville shouted.

She dropped like a sack of bricks.

Several girls squealed, although not Luna. Luna didn't even seem capable of squealing.

"Oh, relax, she'll come 'round in a minute," Neville snapped, fixing his legs and getting back up. "Expelliarmus," he muttered, taking Ginny's wand in case she was faking it and planning to retaliate. "Okay. Who can tell me what they just learned?"

"She got you with a stupid third-year spell," Parvati volunteered.

Kimberly bristled at that, but Neville was nodding.

"I was looking out for dangerous spells, things that were going to hurt me, and I got caught because I underestimated her creativity. Never think that any spell you know won't be of any use. They all have their applications. Anyone else?"

"She underestimated you, too," said another girl.

"Yes, she did. She got cocky. She was keeping me on the defensive, and it made her too confident. Never, never assume that your opponent isn't going to get you at any moment until you have them unconscious with their wand in your hand. And even then, be on the lookout for a spare wand. They're not totally safe until they're in Azkaban."

"Right, because Azkaban is so safe," someone muttered.

Good point, Neville thought. All he said aloud was, "Let's see what you can do, then. Partner up."

They did, and Neville walked over to see how things had ended up between Terry and Ernie. He left Ginny on the floor as an object lesson for the other girls, although Cho was heading over to get her up while Hermione glared daggers at Luna. (Neville had tried to ask about the sudden enmity between those two, but he'd been rebuffed. Firmly.) He was interested to see which boy had won the duel. People tended to underestimate Terry because he looked so slender

and bookish, but he was no weakling. However, since Ernie knew that . . .

He found both of them on the floor, glaring at one another and moaning. Ron was standing by them, looking highly amused. Neville just chuckled and shook his head.

“Nice to know they’re on our side, isn’t it?” Ron said.

“Just what I was thinking.”

Neville continued around the room, directing, suggesting, sometimes just watching. The room was different this year. Neville, perhaps because he hadn’t spent nearly as much time as Harry in martial arts studios, had a different vision of their perfect practice room. His had cushions instead of floor mats, mirrors on one wall where a person could improve their fighting stance, but most of all, the room was much larger. The DL had about twenty new members this year. He’d kept the list of victims that had appeared in the original room, which had grown so long that it nearly stretched the length of the room. He’d had one of their newbies help him unroll it during their first meeting this year, to show them all how long it had gotten and impress on everyone, especially the new members, just what was at stake.

He hadn’t had trouble leading the group. He was one of only two people in the DL who’d been at the Ministry last year, and they trusted what he had to say about Death Eaters. He hadn’t been all that respected during his first years here, but his fanaticism in the DL had people’s attention.

“Okay, everyone, wrap it up!” He waited a moment for the last spells to be cast, and for people to help their opponents back to rights. “Listen up! I have an announcement!” He had to wait another moment for people to stop talking. “Okay. I talked to Professor Black earlier, and he told me he’s talked Professor Moody into doing a guest lecture next week.” There was some cheering for that. Another of their old professors, Professor Lupin, came in from time to time to help with demonstrations, but they hadn’t seen Moody since his retirement at the end of Neville’s fourth year. “Not only that, but

Moody's heard all about the DL, and he's interested in coming to a meeting to watch us work." Even more cheering at that. "So, I want everyone putting in some extra practice this week. He's a hard man to impress, but I know we can. Let's show him what we've got!"

A final round of cheering, and the meeting began to break up. Neville stayed in fairly close contact with Professor Black about the DL, getting suggestions whenever he could, and sometimes spending extra time with the professor to perfect something himself before he tried to show it to his group. But even he was proud that they'd worked hard enough to get Moody to come in.

"Think Potter will show up for that one?" Ernie asked him.

"Hope so," Neville shrugged.

"That would be wicked!" Colin Creevey, who'd been practicing near Ernie and Terry, enthused. "I would love to get a photo of him and Moody!"

"Down, boy," Ernie muttered, making Neville snicker.

"I guess he would only be here if he's got the opportunity to hang out with somebody famous," another boy, a Ravenclaw, said.

"Showoff," his dueling partner agreed.

"He already knows Moody," Ron objected loudly. "Why would he come here just to see Moody when his own godfather obviously sees the man all the time?"

"Still a showoff."

"No, he isn't," Hermione said in a dangerous voice, which gave everyone a moment's pause.

"I don't think you can call it showing off when he does spells better than we do. How is he supposed to get sufficient practice if he has to hold back his abilities?" Luna asked innocently. "He doesn't care when one of us does something better than he does."

Hermione didn't look too happy about her ally, but since no one was looking entirely convinced yet, she kept going.

"I would think that we'd all be pretty happy he was better at Defense than the rest of us," she said starchy. "Since you're all counting on him to save you from the Darkest wizard of our time."

Everyone seemed embarrassed by that.

"Are you here to learn Defense, or aren't you?" Neville spoke up. "I told you all at the beginning of the year that you came into this room for one reason, and if you weren't committed to it, you could get out. Everyone who came here just to watch Harry and try to judge him can go right now. I'll want your coin on your way out." There was a stony silence. "Everyone who wants to do their part in this war can feel free to keep their coin and be at the meeting next week to show off what you've learned to Professor Moody. Meeting dismissed."

He shook his head as he exited the room with Ron. "Maybe it's just because we were forced to spend six months with Draco Malfoy, but I don't understand the way they think they're going to like everyone else in the DL. It doesn't matter if they like each other, they're here to fight each other."

Ron gave him a hearty pat on the shoulder. "I know, mate. A lot of them aren't taking it seriously yet." Looking subdued, he added, "Having Kimberly around ought to open their eyes a bit."

Neville sighed. "She's the first one from Gryffindor to lose someone like that, but I know she's not going to be the last. We've got prefects rounds now, you and me, right?"

Ron nodded, and they started walking to their assigned area of the castle.

"Could be you or me next," Neville muttered. "My gran's not exactly soft-spoken, and your whole family's pissed him off, haven't they?"

Ron shrugged. "Percy hasn't yet, but all of my other brothers are part of the Order now. But nobody can say we didn't know what we were

getting into, y'know? They told us what it was going to be like. All of the adults were willing to tell us how bad it can be, even though most of us didn't want to know."

"Still, even we've got to feel lucky. Us and our families, he'll probably just kill. The headmaster, Harry, Professor Black . . . those are people he's going to hurt before he kills them."

Ron snorted. "And people think Harry should lighten up."

Neville shrugged. "A few more people like Kimberly will cure them of that."

"What d'you think he's doing with Dumbledore?"

Neville shrugged again. "Probably not playing Exploding Snap."

Ron chuckled, but then they came across a fight and had to break it up. They ran into a lot of that these days, and the night promised to be busy.

"We will, my lord," Crouch murmured, his eyes lowered, his voice soothing.

"Of course we will," came Bellatrix Lestrange's more strident tones. "And when we do, he will be your plaything."

The Dark Lord smiled at her, at the way her eyes rose though her head was bowed, dared to look up at him. She was like his pet, Draco thought with disgust. Like a lapdog who wagged its tail when the master patted its head.

"My dear, devoted Bella," their lord said. "Always so confident. Of course we will, but the question is how, and that is a question to which I must carefully apply myself so that I can be sure the action I have chosen is the best one taken."

Which was his way of covering up, Draco thought, though he tried so hard not to think it, that he had no idea what to do. He wasn't about to admit that, not the Dark Lord himself.

Bellatrix only gazed at him worshipfully, while Crouch threw in with, "Whatever your plans, master, they will be perfect."

That was why the master liked Aunt Bellatrix better than most of his other servants, Draco thought as he watched the drama play out. She was full to the brim with love for the master, but she didn't offer up meaningless words to get ahead. She got ahead by being ruthless and never questioning authority. She was looking at him now, and Draco stifled the shiver that threatened to show itself. Dear Auntie Bella gave him the creeps. Insanity shone out of her dark eyes, and Draco didn't know what had ever given Rodolphus Lestrange the courage to propose marriage to her.

It was obviously what she was looking at him for, what she wanted. She hated the fact that he even got invited to these meetings, considered her sister's traitorous little boy to be unworthy of the Mark that he bore. But it was his house, and so he lounged in a chair, hoping he looked relaxed in this company instead of on the verge of throwing up. She wanted him to speak up, to earn his keep. This was Potter they were talking about, after all. Who better placed than Draco? He knew he ought to make an effort to appear eager.

"May I be of service, master?" he called to the Dark Lord in a calm voice. Well, it sounded calm, but in reality, it was sort of dead. He was sort of dead. He had been ever since the skull and snake had seared into his flesh. He was supposed to be proud of his service, but instead he grew more lethargic about it by the day. He needed to do better at hiding that. He needed to show his master that he was at least trying to answer the demands placed on him. Or he'd be truly dead. "I am certain that the boy would trust me at least long enough to lure him from the castle. You might not be able to meet him from a strong position, but he is no match for you."

Draco waited to hear what his master would say. He wanted to live, oh, how he wanted to live, and so he had to offer. But he was almost more afraid that the Dark Lord would say yes than that he would say no.

"It is tempting, because it is easy," his master mused. "But I think not, Draco. You would immediately lose your position at the school. There are several ways that I could bring Potter away from the school and deal with him swiftly, but I have only you to get me inside its defences to strike the greater blow. No, you shall simply continue with the task I have laid out for you."

Which was, of course, impossible to do. Well, perhaps possible, but not to him. He'd made an effort, of course. He'd searched out all the secret passages he could find, but they were too well known or protected by enchantments that were obvious to the spells he'd been taught to use to look for them. But that was as creative as he'd gotten. It would help, he thought bitterly, if he could muster up any enthusiasm for the task. Instead, every time he thought about it he got a mental picture of his Aunt Bellatrix chasing down and torturing to death small children.

But he didn't let any of that show. His face remained implacable, despite the way his heart pounded from fear that the Dark Lord would be looking into his mind. He couldn't afford apathy. He couldn't afford thoughts of dissension. His master would know, and Draco would pay dearly.

"Of course, my lord," he murmured. "My every waking thought is devoted to the task you've given me."

Which was the first entirely genuine thing he'd said tonight, he realised. His every waking thought, and some of his nightmares. But he had to do it. If it didn't get done, he didn't get rewarded, and if he didn't get rewarded, he didn't get out from under the other Death Eaters and into the role he saw for himself. He'd made the decision to come to this side, based on the benefits he would get from it. If the requirements of staying alive and on top were a little more stringent than those on the other side, then what was that to him? He already had a head start by having Lucius Malfoy for a father. And he was no coward, nor a weakling. He needed to try harder. Starting immediately.

"It will not be terribly difficult," the others were saying, while Draco wallowed in the depression that his constant fear had given him. "He

is a mere boy, and an impulsive one at that. We saw that at the Ministry. We can get him out of Hogwarts easily enough, and dispatch him still more easily than that.”

Draco almost laughed aloud then. What a pack of idiots. They honestly thought Potter was such a fool? Because he’d shown up to get his hands on one of the most important objects in the country before Draco’s own master could do so? Both sides had failed, but neither side had been foolish to be there. Impulsive? Perhaps. But no fool. Potter wouldn’t take their bait, whatever they were planning. He wasn’t about to leave the safety of Hogwarts for anything.

But Draco kept his mouth shut. He always did.

“Harry Potter?”

There was a young student, probably a second year, standing at his elbow at the dinner table. Harry turned from his studying to look at the boy, whose name he could not recall.

“Yes?”

The boy was blushing furiously, probably at addressing the Great Harry bloody Potter. “Wow, you’re— I mean, it’s just—”

“Spit it out, mate,” Harry said, not unkindly.

“You’re wanted in Professor Black’s office.”

“Oh,” Harry muttered. “Okay. Thank you.”

It was just Sirius, so Harry relaxed. He hadn’t even noticed himself tensing up when he heard his name. But as he forced his shoulders to release their tension, he realised that he’d already been very tense before the boy came along. His muscles felt cramped, and his eyes tired.

He trudged up to see Sirius with a weary feeling. He was studying all the time, these days. He was learning an incredible number of things from Dumbledore, alongside his course of Hogwarts studies, not to

mention the extra Defensive things he was learning when DL meetings put ideas in his head. But it was exhausting. He felt like he hadn't been without either a book or a wand in his hand since the night he broke up with Hermione (and if he was honest, well before that, but before that he hadn't minded so much).

He poked his head in and cleared his throat.

"Oh, Harry, there you are," Sirius said, immediately standing up and moving away from the papers he was grading. "Come in."

Harry just stood in the doorway as Sirius came toward him. "If it's not terribly urgent, I really do need to study and get prepared to meet Reed at the lake on Tuesday, it's already Sunday . . ."

"Harry," Sirius cut him short, and then he was at Harry's side, gripping his arm. "Exactly. It's Sunday. When was the last time you took a couple of hours off? You know, not to study, or to practice Quidditch, but just to relax? Play a game of cards or something?"

Harry shrugged irritably. "I don't have time for all that right now, and you know it."

"I know that you've only been home for an evening once this entire term and you spent the whole night reading a textbook. I also know that it has more to do with your breakup with Hermione that you're letting on." Sirius gripped his arm tightly so that Harry couldn't pull it away. "You're coming home with me. I've already cleared it with McGonagall that you won't be home tonight. Come on."

"Sirius!" Harry snapped, and broke the grip on his arm. "I'm going back to the Great Hall," he muttered.

Sirius moved to block the doorway. "If you're still hungry, you can eat at home with us."

Harry glared at him. "None of the other students go home every weekend, so what makes it so strange that I don't?"

Sirius just rolled his eyes and bullied him to the fireplace. He was aided by the simple fact that Harry had no genuine desire to hurt Sirius, so he wasn't about to throw him down onto the stone floor and try to punch his head in to get away. Harry let himself be pushed in.

Remus greeted him jovially when he got there, looking perfectly pleased to see him. Harry decided he wasn't all that hungry, but he did get talked into sitting at the dinner table with the two men. He kind of wondered where Tonks was. Sirius had told him that she'd been coming by for dinner awfully regularly of late. Then he took a closer look at Remus. The man was pale, picking at his food, wincing at sudden noises or sudden movements.

It was the full moon, and Harry hadn't even noticed. Remus must have told Tonks to stay away from him tonight. He didn't want her to see him like this. Harry didn't think that probably sat too well with Tonks, and thought it was foolish of Remus to try to keep it from her. Unless Harry missed his guess entirely (and hadn't he made rather a habit of that with relationships), Tonks would have to know eventually. But before Harry could so much as broach the subject, Sirius urged him up from the table.

Sirius dragged him into their sparring room, with an aside to Remus that Harry wasn't meant to hear but heard anyway.

"He's strung pretty tight, Moony. Can you make sure we've got a few remedies stocked up?"

"We're headquarters for the Order, we're practically St. Mungo's outpatient clinic these days," was the whispered retort.

Then Sirius shut the door, dropped into a crouch, and waited for Harry. Harry didn't hesitate. He leapt on his godfather with a muted roar, and Sirius was pinned to the floor in a decided victory for Harry within moments. Harry loosened his grip only slightly before Sirius leapt up at him, but Harry was ready for it. They both fought fiercely, and only got off the ground for brief moments. It was all wrestling for dominance, kicking, punching, choking—in short, brutal.

They exited the room drenched in sweat, spattered with blood, and swelling with myriad bruises. Tired, and much, much happier, Harry didn't argue much with the suggestion that he and Sirius take their Animagus forms for the night and stay with Remus. He was relaxed now, having worked off his frustrations, and ready to do something that wasn't work.

"Stay still," Remus muttered as he dabbed bruise cream all over Harry's face. "Merlin, you two nearly killed each other."

Harry shrugged. "You would have had fun."

"Sure, if all that violence and blood hadn't sent me over the edge and made me transform and start mauling you."

"You're going to be transforming in . . . oh, wow, about twenty minutes, anyway. Are we staying here?"

They looked at one another, shrugged, and Sirius ventured, "Anyone up for a run in the forest?"

Harry frowned. "We shouldn't be out in the open like that. Just us, alone. The Forbidden Forest isn't protected."

"By anything other than centaurs, werewolves, gigantic spiders, et cetera," Sirius said dryly. "Not to mention that we're going to be unrecognizable animals. We hear or see anyone, and we stop acting like friends. Come on, Harry. Live a little."

Harry grudgingly agreed, thinking Sure, I'll live a little, so long as I don't get killed.

There wasn't a soul, other than the three of them, traveling through the trees that night. It was a fantastic night, and Harry woke in the morning to go back to school feeling refreshed and ready for his studies. Sirius was right, again. Harry reminded himself that Sirius was often right, and that the doubts Dumbledore had raised in him on Saturday shouldn't change his mind. He needed to focus. He had a job to do. It was time he got serious about doing it.

Book Three: Being

Arc Two

Scene Changes

transformation

day to day

changes

too fast to keep up

birth and death

maturation

shifting allegiances

nothing remains

fear

love

pain

shame

anger

lust

hope

living and breathing

betrayed and a little broken

dreaming

laughing

screaming

hating

smiling

sometimes just being

“Alas, how soon the hours are over

Counted us out to play the lover!

And how much narrower is the stage

Allotted us to play the sage!

But when we play the fool, how wide

The theatre expands! Beside,

How long the audience sits before us!

How many prompters! What a chorus!”

~ Plays ~ Walter Savage Landor ~

Chapter Six

“Your partner’s dead, Potter!” Moody roared at him, his real eye bulging while the magical one continued to make circuits around the room. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Harry drew himself up, glancing down at a boy called Zacharias that he didn’t know very well. The boy was laying there with his arms and legs splayed, his eyes shut—for one wild second, Harry was afraid that Moody was right, his dueling partner was dead. His heart

squeezed, then he reminded himself that he'd just seen Ernie Macmillan hit his roommate with a Stunner. Ernie and Neville, who were fighting in tandem against Harry and Zacharias, stood still and lowered their wands, grinning and high-fiving one another over their victory.

Harry wiped sweat from his forehead. "I was trying not to be killed, myself, sir."

Moody's fake leg thunked roughly on the floor as he stalked closer to Harry and glared at him.

"Did I not just finish telling you that when fighting with a partner, their life should be considered equal to your own? You didn't even notice he was about to go down, did you? You can only protect your partner through constant vigilance!" he barked.

Harry loved Moody, he tried to convince himself that he really did, but he was fighting a sudden compulsion to leap on the man and strangle him. If he said that phrase even one more time . . .

"Harry," he said in a quieter voice, leading him apart from the other boys. "Your problem isn't really vigilance, your problem is partnership. I've put you with three different people now, and you can't fight with any of them. Is there anyone in this room that you do partner well with?"

Harry glanced back over to see that Zacharias was being helped to his feet by his opponents in the duel, and felt shameful guilt. Moody was right. He didn't partner well. He worked well alone, and he obviously considered himself more important than Zacharias or he'd have tried harder to protect him. He considered Moody's question. His eyes swept the room.

He'd been able to fight alongside Draco, but he'd turned out to be an unbelievable prat so he wasn't exactly here, was he? His eyes fell on Hermione, and before he could help it, their eyes had locked together. He was so surprised by what he saw that he didn't look away. She didn't look angry anymore. She just looked sad.

"You, girl!" Moody barked.

"That's Hermione Granger, sir," Harry offered, fearing what Moody wanted with her.

"Granger!"

She walked toward them cautiously.

"Yes, Professor Moody?"

"I'm not your professor anymore," the old man groused. "Do me a favour, partner up with Potter."

Hermione looked stricken. "Sir, I—"

"Just one fight," he said dismissively. His zooming magical eyeball came to an abrupt halt. "I'll put you against Weasley. Weasley, and Weasley's girlfriend!" he shouted. "Over here!"

Ron and Parvati strolled over, and began to scoot faster when Moody scowled at them.

"You're going to duel with Potter and Granger, here. I'd like to watch you work, if you don't mind." His roving eye paused again, and he turned around to roar, "If you two girls don't stop giggling and get to work, you're dismissed!"

Neville, who would have issued the same warning if he hadn't given this meeting over to Moody, scowled. These were his students now, and he was obviously feeling rather possessive about them.

Moody turned back to the four students in front of him. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Hermione still looked helpless, as though she wanted to protest but didn't know how. Harry would have protested if he'd felt at all comfortable doing so, but Moody didn't need to know about his relationship problems, and Ron and Parvati didn't need to know any more. Unless Parvati knew everything, being Hermione's roommate

and therefore within the range of acceptable female companionship during the breakup stage.

He didn't really have the chance to say anything, anyway. Parvati led things off with a nasty curse to boil the blood, directed at Harry. He shielded it and added a bit of humour by returning it with a curse to freeze the body. Parvati did deflect it, but it grazed her arm and a trail of ice crystals formed across her hand and on her sleeve. Ron was shielding a curse from Hermione, but he immediately expanded his shield to include Parvati while she worked a charm to release her hand from the ice. She locked eyes with her boyfriend, Ron nodded, and they both hurled a blasting curse at the ground underneath Hermione. Harry saw it coming and acted without a thought. He let out a sharp yell of warning to Hermione and grabbed her with one arm around her waist, lifting her away from the floor while he attempted to deflect the curse to a further point.

She was greatly surprised, to say the least, but she did take the opportunity to hit Ron with a very firm petrifying spell that he didn't block because he was too surprised by Harry, as well. Parvati ducked out of the way, then tried to return to Ron to get him moving again. She was unable to help him because she was getting bombarded with spells from both Harry and Hermione. Harry found himself moving according to some rhythm, like it was something natural to the universe that he was only just discovering. The rhythm was so easy to follow! Hermione threw a curse, and he shielded them. He dropped the shield to send off a curse of his own, and she spun in front of him to block what Parvati returned while he was busy. She shielded them both while he issued a rapid series of concussions at the floor around Parvati, penning her in. Just as Parvati started to panic, Hermione stopped blocking and threw out the finishing curse, sending the girl tumbling to the cushions.

Hermione let out a deep breath, turned to Harry . . . and found herself being jerked behind him while Harry desperately blocked a curse from Ron, who'd managed to work past the petrification. Harry was both quicker and more powerful than Ron, and put him down with only a few more spells traded.

Harry's hair, which was getting long again, was dripping sweat into his eyes. He flung his hair back and wiped at his face. He saw Hermione directing her wand to the back of her neck, and a moment later she sighed with relief as the cooling charm did its work.

"Bravo," Moody said, sounding at least less grumpy now. "I almost thought you couldn't do it, Potter. Well done, Granger."

"Thank you, sir," she said, a bit out of breath.

Moody thumped away to go work with someone else, and Harry turned to Hermione with an uncharacteristically shy smile.

"I guess we don't make a bad . . ." She turned away and went to help their opponents up. ". . . team," he muttered. Okay, so we're still not talking, I guess. How long can she possibly stay mad at me?

But he'd been looking at her when she turned away from him. She wasn't mad. She was almost in tears. She missed him. Why doesn't she just say so?

Harry, feeling more chastised than successful after that duel, determined to work harder at creating good partnerships with the rest of the DL. He was going to be useless in battle if no one could trust him to watch their back. That he'd done well when partnered with Hermione seemed to make that all the more clear to him, because he didn't think the two of them would ever find themselves side by side in a real battle. He had to work well with all the students in this room.

He sought out Ernie and Neville and went to work with them, forcing himself to focus more. He couldn't be as solitary as he wanted to be. It would be nice if he could, but that wasn't how it was supposed to work. He had to learn to be part of this. At least Ernie and Neville were willing to let him try, unlike most of the DL. They were either too afraid to partner with him or too snotty.

Moody's presence drove everyone to strive more for excellence that night. They stayed well beyond their scheduled time, so much so that Moody had to scribble off a note to the Heads of house apologizing for keeping them out past curfew. They trudged off to their

dormitories as tired and sore as they could ever remember being. And in Harry's mind, that was a very good thing.

Harry sat quite still in his chair, his mind trying to encompass everything that had happened in the last few hours. Images rushing past him, facts and shocking secrets assaulting him at every turn . . . he was exhausted. Dumbledore looked serene as he replaced the bowl in his cabinet and returned to his own seat. Harry knew that he himself was looking rather haggard and overwhelmed, and he envied Dumbledore his calm.

He closed his eyes, trying to get a grip on himself. But when they slid shut, the sight of Dumbledore settling into his desk chair became a rush of memories, centred around a young boy with a brittle soul that had slowly become encased in a shell of hatred that hardened into something impenetrable. A boy who'd had no one and nothing, except perhaps Dumbledore, and who had been striving ever since for the recognition and love he'd been denied in his youth.

"It's a tragic tale," Harry said slowly, blinking his eyes in an effort to dispel all the Pensieve images from his mind. "I see why a person might think that he could have turned out differently. But I'm not sure that he would have. That intense desire to cause pain that he has—he was born with that. I think he always was going to be cruel."

Dumbledore nodded gravely, looking interested but not entirely convinced. "You think, then, that it was impossible to make him anything but what he is?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Look at me. Sirius took me away from the Dursleys and I think that's the reason I am the way I am, but he could have left me there and I'd still be really studious, still be better on my own than in a group. I think that's just part of me. In the same way, I think that if you had taken Voldemort from the orphanage at an earlier age, he still would have been a bully."

"I will not say that you are wrong," Dumbledore said cautiously, "but I think that you are oversimplifying."

Harry shrugged again. He probably was, but that, too, was part of his personality. He'd always tended to see things in black and white. But he was starting to recognise that he shouldn't, at least not as much as he did. Just as he was coming to see his loner status as a weakness, he was beginning to think that his tendency to make quick judgements was a fault. In battle, it was necessity. It was survival. But maybe it wasn't such a good thing in relationships and among allies. He wasn't sure what was making him change, but he could see a slow transition in his mind. A sort of softening that gave other people a little more room for error.

"I probably am," he said aloud. "But I just can't help but see the cruelty in him, just like it was in his family. They were all bitter, hateful people, and he seems to be sort of the end result of all that resentment. I guess that he could have been different, but only if his mother had lived, or if he hadn't found out where he came from, or something. He knew that he was the product of the Gaunt's misery, and I think it affected him."

"In that, you are entirely correct," Dumbledore said with more surety. "I am certain that knowing his lineage influenced him."

"You're not convinced."

"I think you yourself might have turned out very differently from the way you imagine yourself. Without Sirius to lean on, you would have sought the company of others. With the answers you needed given to you more easily, you might not have learned such habits of study. If you had learned of the prophecy from someone else, you might have put more faith in it. You see?"

Harry wondered if this was a technique meant to distract him from the heart of the matter, or if it was only that Dumbledore truly didn't see it himself. "Sir? You shouldn't think that way. You shouldn't think that Tom Riddle's transition to Voldemort was your fault. You didn't even know, sir, and by the time you did, it was too late. You can't think that you could have changed him. It's not as though you didn't try."

Dumbledore seemed to be angry with him, his jaw clenched and his usually open expression becoming guarded. He was looking down at

Harry in some indefinable way, despite how close they were in height. Harry began to suspect that he had overstepped the bounds of their relationship. Dumbledore was about a hundred years older than he, and graciously giving whatever remained of his time to teaching Harry as much as he possibly could. What was Harry thinking, to presume he could just say things like that to a man who deserved much better from him?

"I'm sorry, sir," he murmured. "That was disrespectful of me."

Dumbledore nodded quietly, shortly, and they moved on with not another word said about it.

"Let us talk about Hepzibah Smith," Dumbledore said, and they did. Then they discussed the possibilities for the unknown Horcruxes, what they might be and where they might be. Harry knew that at this stage, it was little more than wild guessing on his part. He needed time to assimilate the information he'd learned from the memories they'd seen tonight. But he'd perused his own memories several times, and they both agreed that Nagini, Voldemort's snake, was entirely too close to him to be merely a pet of some kind. She was a snake who managed to act in her owner's interests—she was too aware. And so she was likely a Horcrux.

Harry had not until that moment considered the possibility that Horcruxes could be living things. It didn't make sense to him that a part of his soul might reside in something that had a soul of its own. He suddenly had a very vivid image of his pet monkey Dudley, riding on his shoulder, and leaping to bite at Voldemort's ugly face on Harry's command. He clapped his hand over his mouth and tried very hard to look like he was yawning instead of guffawing.

He wasn't very convincing, and he ended up having to explain what it was he found amusing about Voldemort's cunning with his Horcruxes. Dumbledore mustered up a patronising smile, but seemed a little too weary to find any humour in it. Harry found himself apologising again, but Dumbledore shook his head, a genuine smile in place now.

"Don't be sorry, Harry. In truth, I am glad. You are being entrusted with a great deal, and the responsibility being laid on your shoulders

is heavier than perhaps you've realised. I am glad that you are still able to laugh. You are a young man and you should have every opportunity to do so."

Harry found himself resenting that.

"I know very well what is riding on me," he said frankly. "I know it because I chose it. I got tired of running away and letting other people get hurt, and I came here to end all this. There isn't any responsibility being laid on my shoulders, because I'm the one putting it on. So if I choose to laugh, I have the right." And neither you nor Voldemort can say I don't, he added rebelliously, but only in his mind. He feared it showed on his face, though, for Dumbledore's expression was hurt.

He changed the subject, once again, back to the their original purpose for meeting tonight.

"Do you know what strikes me the most about the way Voldemort went after those people in those memories? He went for them in their homes. He struck when they were in the place that felt safest to them."

Dumbledore nodded, a gleam in his eye. "You are beginning to see something that he thinks is a secret."

"I am?"

"You are seeing that he prefers the easiest path to get what he wants."

Harry was struck by that, and held up his mind to beg for a moment of thought. It all washed over him. The way he snuck up on people when they weren't on their guard, in their homes. Poison. Avada Kedavra, the quickest and most assured method. Sending Nagini into the Ministry to clear his way to the prophecy, and sending Malfoy and Lestranger for it. Playing head games to force Harry out instead of coming after him.

"I didn't realise just how much he was in love with himself," Harry said in disgust. "He's immortal, and he still doesn't want to risk his pretty face? What a jackass."

"A caution, though, Harry," Dumbledore said in a warning tone. "Do not underestimate him. He prefers the easier path, but that does not mean he will not take the difficult one if he must. It is not a matter of risking himself, only of risking his goals. And the safety and secrecy with which he has surrounded his person are tantamount to those goals. He will certainly take a riskier path if he feels it is necessary."

Abashed, Harry quieted. Voldemort was arrogant, yes, but Harry was going off making quick judgements again. He wasn't spending enough time thinking about Voldemort's motives. In his mind, Voldemort was wrong, and that was that. He could conjecture all day about Voldemort's methods, about what he would do, but he didn't spend enough time thinking about what lay behind those methods, why he did it that way. Dumbledore did. And that was why Dumbledore was the leader of this war, not Harry.

Was it something you learned with time, or was it simply something in his person? he wondered. Had Dumbledore ever been arrogant enough to assume that his enemy's motivations were unimportant? Because Harry was beginning to see himself as unbelievably arrogant, and he didn't like it. Maybe Dumbledore had always, even as a young man, been able to see things from another person's perspective.

"It becomes easier with time," Dumbledore said with a soft smile. "The only real requirement is the willingness to try to change the way you think."

Harry knew better than to be surprised by the way Dumbledore could read him, but he was still embarrassed.

"Do you think I'm conceited?" he blurted out.

Dumbledore shook his head, and Harry felt a sense of relief. Maybe he was being too hard on himself.

“I think you are young, Harry. And there is nothing wrong with being young. You are spending your youth at better pursuits than I did, and for that I admire you. I wish that you had the freedom to enjoy these years as you should, to waste some of it on the joys of being young and being certain that you are invincible and always right. But instead, you are here, listening to an old man ramble, and growing up far too quickly.”

In other words, Harry thought sardonically, yes he was a total wanker but Dumbledore found all teenagers to be so, which made it okay.

Harry shook his head. “I know sixteen seems very young to you, sir, but I don’t think it’s asking too much for me to grow up now. In fact, if I was doing anything but learning as much as I could from you, then I’d consider my youth wasted. I, more than anyone, know that there are no guarantees for how long I’m going to have intellect and energy at my disposal.” I could be killed so easily . . .

Harry shuddered.

“Harry?”

“I was just thinking, sir, about Voldemort’s tactics. The way he goes after people. He’s sneaky, you know? I was just thinking that if he does decide to attack me, it’s going to happen here, or at my family’s home. And I don’t like to imagine that.”

“Hogwarts is a veritable fortress, Harry,” Dumbledore said with assurance, but there were lines around his eyes. “I will not say that its defenses are completely impenetrable, but it is very unlikely. As for your home, so long as I am its Secret Keeper, you are safe.”

Harry bit his lip. “Sir, I know that. But . . .”

It was wrong of him to say, he thought, so he stopped himself there, but Dumbledore knew what he meant.

“We are working on that, Harry,” he said quietly. “Sirius and I have begun discussing who will perform another Fidelius Charm when I am gone.”

Harry nodded, feeling a distinct squeeze around his heart. That surprised him. He hadn't expected to feel so sad at the idea of Dumbledore being gone. He was an old man, whom Harry was using for his own purposes, the way he'd always seen Dumbledore as using others. He'd never expected to become attached to Dumbledore, the way Neville was. But at the thought that Dumbledore's precarious health couldn't hold out much longer, Harry definitely felt sorrow. Strange to think that he would miss him.

"Enough of that for one evening," Dumbledore declared suddenly, a smile on his face. "There is time yet for a little happiness, don't you think? Go enjoy your evening, Harry. Shall we meet again after your lesson with Reed tomorrow evening to discuss any further thoughts you may have?"

Harry nodded, standing up. Dumbledore did the same, walking Harry to the door of his office. Harry noticed that Dumbledore's movements were slow and looked painful.

He's dying. He's really dying, and he's starting to really know it. No wonder he's been more short with me than he usually is.

"I am proud of how hard you have worked to learn from Reed, my boy. You are quite a remarkable student."

"Thank you, sir. Speaking of that, I've nearly completed that study you gave me on the principles behind your research on dragon's blood. To have your notes has been . . ." Harry literally had no words to describe how amazing it was to have a copy of Dumbledore's original research notes. He'd never more thoroughly enjoyed being a geek.

"I am glad they have been helpful," Dumbledore said with a cheerful smile.

The amazing thing was, the modesty he displayed was real. He knew he was brilliant, but he never reveled in it the way Harry would if it were him. That, too, seemed to be something that would come with time to those who were willing.

“Harry, before you go, may I apologise?”

“Sir?”

“For the way I reacted to you earlier this evening, when you told me that I should not feel guilty for the path my former student has chosen.”

Harry blushed and looked down. “I know that I was being really impertinent, and I’m sorry.”

“No, Harry, you were not,” Dumbledore said softly. “We have spent a great deal of time together recently, and I have invited the level of comfort necessary for you to be able to speak your mind to me. I should not have become offended that you did so. I am afraid that your words stung me, Harry, and in consequence, I treated you poorly.”

Harry was dumbfounded by that. “Um, that’s okay,” he mumbled.

“You are far more a young man than you are a boy, Harry, and you are far more an apprentice than you are simply a student. I wish you to always feel that you can share your thoughts with me. I know that it was not your intention to be disrespectful in any way.”

Harry hadn’t thought of their relationship in so many words, but when Dumbledore spoke it, he realised that he would never have spoken to Dumbledore that way if he hadn’t felt safe to do so. Sarcastically, if he didn’t like Dumbledore, he might have said something similar. But now that he respected the man, he had only spoken because he thought he could. Dumbledore wasn’t just any teacher, he’d become Harry’s mentor. And Harry was surprised to find that meant they were on a much more equal footing than he would have said they were, if he was asked.

He was really going to have to watch himself, now. He actually had a reason to let this stuff go to his head, but that was a sure way to get himself isolated and killed by his enemies. He needed to do exactly the opposite of that. He’d been spending too much time alone,

studying, acting like he operated on a completely different plane of existence from the other people at this school. That lesson with Moody had proven that.

What it meant, he thought uncomfortably, was that he needed to try to make friends again. Just because it had failed the first time didn't mean it always would. He needed to start over.

Sirius was distracted as he left his classroom to speak to Minerva. He was ready to go home, but she'd said something earlier in the day about having to send Harry and his roommates to bed the night before. He hadn't had his godson in class that day, and he'd rather hear it from Minerva, anyway, to be honest. She would tell him whether or not Harry had been faking the companionship that had kept them up studying and playing cards past curfew. If he asked Harry, Harry would try to downplay it or just say that he was creating allies or something. But Sirius didn't think that was it.

Harry was lonely. Sirius just wanted to know that Harry was finally making friends. Sirius was only now beginning to see just how solitary their life had been, and how hard it had been for Harry to make the transition to this school. It had been easier on Sirius, who already had friends here, and a home, and he'd already had a lot of experiences in this world. Harry had none of those things, and he'd been forced to sink or swim in a completely new environment. It made Sirius appreciate all over again what a strong person Harry had become.

As he walked down the hall, he got a creepy feeling, like someone was watching him. He wasn't sure what gave him the feeling, and shrugged it off. It was like an itch between his shoulders, and he tried to ignore it. Who would be watching him here?

When it happened, it was as soft as a whisper.

It was silent.

He had never known anyone was there.

An arm slid over his neck, tightened, and held him there.

Sirius felt his heart skip a beat as his brain tried to make sense of it. He was being choked. He was barely on his feet, being held tight against the chest of a smaller, more slender man behind him. One arm, corded with muscle, locked over his throat, while another arm held his hands to his sides. There was a breath in his ear.

What . . . Why?

"You're dead," the voice said quietly.

Sirius bucked and inhaled one precious breath. "Harry?" he squeezed out of his constricted throat. "What are you . . .?"

The arm released him, and Sirius immediately bent his knees and lowered his centre of gravity so he didn't fall. He spun around to see Harry standing with his arms loose and a strange, sad expression on his face.

"What are you doing?" Sirius snapped. "You almost scared the life out of me!"

Harry shrugged. "You were way off your guard, Sirius. You knew I was there, I could see that you knew. You shouldn't have let me sneak up on you like that."

"Where were you hiding?"

Harry didn't answer.

"There," Sirius said, the truth suddenly becoming obvious. He looked at the statue in the small alcove that he'd walked past not a moment ago. Harry had been standing directly beside the statue, and there was his Invisibility Cloak pooled on the floor beside it. Harry was right. He'd felt someone watching him, and he should have known immediately where they would be. It was the only place a person could stand wearing that cloak without the risk of being run into.

"Why don't you just tell me what you're doing?" Sirius said, scowling.

"Aren't you just a little bit ashamed of how easy that was for me?"

Sirius shrugged irritably. "A little."

Harry sighed. "You could have done it to me, too. We've started losing our touch, Sirius. We need to get it back."

Sirius stared at him. "You snuck up on me and choked me just to prove that you could?"

Harry nodded. "And I'll keep doing it until I can't surprise you anymore."

Sirius raised his eyebrow. "I'm guessing you want me to return the favour?"

Harry nodded again. "We're not as safe here as we'd like to think we are, Sirius. We have to start remembering that."

"You're right. You're absolutely right. We aren't prepared at all."

"So you'll help?"

In truth, Sirius wanted to start punching things and blasting them to pieces. He was angry, on a number of levels. Angry that Harry had done it, angry that it had worked . . . but mostly angry because he agreed that it was necessary. They were getting soft at Hogwarts, and they couldn't afford that.

"Of course," he said simply.

Harry walked down the hallway with a book open in his hands, frantically trying to cram a few more sentences in before his next class. He was taking studying too far, Ron thought. Further than Hermione Granger ever had, and that was saying something. He was muttering under his breath, and based on the fact that Ron could not figure out what in bloody hell he was saying, he assumed it was Mermish. Harry said he'd been studying it for some reason.

He was also studying a book on Goblin culture and society, complete with a list and explanation of religious observances and holiday

pastimes. He was doing so well in Potions class that Snape hadn't been able to find a thing wrong with his work, which was almost eerie. He was also about to fall down the stairs.

"Mate, the—"

Harry, without raising his eyes, descended the stairs beside Ron. Ron just snorted and let him read. When they could tear Harry away from his books, he'd turned out to be a surprising amount of fun. Not something they'd truly expected of him, with how intense he always seemed to be. When he was pretending to be Evan Rivers, he'd stuck mostly to himself, or with just Hermione. He'd been leading the Defense League, but he'd remained sort of apart. Now he was trying to be a regular guy. It turned out that he had a wicked sense of humour, and he was amazingly okay with losing at chess and cards. But only when they could get him away from his books. Not that often, really.

Then Ron saw, out of the corner of his vision, someone coming up behind them, too swiftly. He didn't know why or who, he didn't have time for that, but he managed to squawk out a sort of warning. It sounded a lot like, "Ah, what, look out . . ." He fumbled to draw his wand.

But Harry didn't even need the warning. He perked up like he heard something, dropped his book on the ground, and suddenly he was also dropping to the ground, turning around with his leg out, in a strange, spinning kick that was meant to sweep the legs right out from under the person coming up on him. But the other person sidestepped and came at Harry from the side. Harry was off-balance, and let himself fall all the way to the ground, rolling back like he meant to receive the attack on his back.

Ron had his wand out.

"Stupefy!" he shouted.

The attacker barely managed to block it, stumbling back against the wall.

“Reducto!” he shouted, blasting the wall behind him. The attacker jumped away, but was knocked on the head by a flying chunk of stone, and he tripped and fell onto the ground.

Ron stared.

“Professor Black?”

Harry had already jumped back up and was grinning at his godfather as he pulled him back to his feet.

“Good one, Sirius,” he said. He turned to Ron. “Thanks for that, mate. I was just going to let him take me to the ground and flip him, but I like your way.”

Sirius dabbed at a trickle of blood on his forehead. “Very good, Mr. Weasley.”

Ron could feel himself blushing in embarrassment. They’d planned this? And apparently he’d just been getting in the way?

“Harry, would you mind?” Sirius asked, gesturing with bloody fingers.

Harry quickly healed the small cut, but didn’t have a spell for the swelling.

“I think I’ll pop in and see Pomfrey,” Sirius said. “Until next time, gentleman,” he grinned, and bowed in the posture that conceded a duel to another wizard, something he’d taught them last year.

When he walked off, Ron turned to Harry with wide eyes. “I can’t believe I just knocked my professor in the head. What was he doing?” Harry shrugged. “We’re trying to stay on our toes,” he said, sounding uncomfortable. “I just thought it would be a good idea if we didn’t get too comfortable anywhere, so we’ve decided to stay in practice with this stuff.”

Ron opened his mouth and closed it again. He wanted to say something, but he wasn’t sure what he wanted to say. There was a time when he would have run off at the mouth anyway, but his years

at Hogwarts and his current position of responsibility had taught him better.

“You think you’ll get attacked here at the school?” he finally asked.

Harry began to walk again. “It’s possible. Not likely, but possible. Besides, isn’t that what the DL is really about? It’s almost become a training camp for the prefects so they can break up fights and avoid ambushes.”

Ron had to think about that. It was true that Neville drove them pretty hard, and the people who complained about it had long since dropped out by now. They had almost reverted back to their original number of members, but the ones who had stayed were all very serious about what they were doing—while they were in the Room of Requirement. Maybe Harry had the right idea. Maybe they ought to be preparing for fights to happen in unexpected places.

“I think we should talk to Neville about this.”

“About what?”

“About the DL doing things like this. You know, being ready. I think there’s a lot that you and Professor Black could teach us about it. What do you think?”

Harry frowned, thinking. “If Neville wants to do that, and if the DL is ready for it, then yeah. That might be a good idea.”

“I’ll talk to him about it, then.”

Ginny and Parvati were patrolling the corridors together, making their regular prefect rounds. They had their heads together, giggling over their conversation. To an outside observer, it was obvious that they were talking about boys, and thoroughly wrapped up in their conversation. Parvati was asking Ginny about something embarrassing that Ron had done as a little boy, and Ginny was blushing furiously as she asked Parvati’s advice about whether or not she should try dating Dean Thomas.

They were capable of handling a situation, should they stumble across one. But they were using their prefect rounds as a time to socialize. They were an easy mark, he thought. He could take them both out before they even knew what was happening.

He leapt out, roaring the words of his spell before he was even fully on his feet. He got Ginny, who whirled around at the sound of his coming but had stupidly thrown herself in front of Parvati instead of defending herself. He turned his wand on Parvati with a howl of triumph.

She quietly, calmly, Levitated the carpet out from under him and Petrified him. She stood over him with a disgusted look.

“Next time, Zacharias, you might want to be a little less obvious.”

Seamus and Dean hurried up the steps, their bookbags swinging behind them as they tried to make it to the library before they were ridiculously late. They were supposed to be in the library studying with some of the other Gryffindor students. Neville was probably up there throwing all his awkward moves on the girls right now, while they were joking around downstairs.

Seamus jerked to a halt when his bookbag split open just at the top of the staircase, and ducked to pick them up. But instead of reaching out for them, he pulled his wand from the pocket of his robes and turned around to where he thought the spell had come from. Dean was already on the ground, looking like he'd been Stupefied, although Seamus hadn't heard a word.

Another spell was coming from behind him. He could feel it, could feel the sensation of an incoming spell prickling on the back of his neck. He had time for nothing more fancy than throwing himself flat on the stone floor and rolling over to aim his wand with both hands in front of his face. But his flying spell was deflected, and his vision was filled with the image of a person pouncing on him. Seamus raised his arms and legs to hold the person off, but found his flailing arms wrestled aside and pinned by his opponent's knees. He tried to use his size to his advantage, scrabbling to get his legs under him to buck the

attacker off, but the attacker had superb balance and control, holding him down without any apparent effort.

Seamus groaned into Harry's face.

"I'm never goin' to best you, am I?"

"You can keep trying," Harry said calmly, and just to add insult to injury, patted his cheek before letting him up.

"You will be begging me for mercy one of these days, just see if you aren't," he muttered.

Harry just grinned as he revived Dean.

"Comin' to the library, Great One?"

Harry shook his head. "I've got to study."

"That's what you do in the library," Dean pointed out. "You do know that, right?"

Harry snorted. "Well, I do. The rest of you flirt. I'll see you later."

Dean helped Seamus pick up his books. "We have to beat him sometime."

Seamus shook his head. "I hope we never do," he said quietly. "I'd rather think he was invincible."

Dean's face became grave. He didn't say anything.

Two weeks later, the only members of the DL who had not been bested in some ambush were Harry, Neville, and Kimberly Kearney, the girl whose father had died in October. They were all determined to continue these tactics, although several of the professors had been forced to speak to them about not doing it in class, in the middle of the night, in the library, Great Hall, and so forth.

Still, Harry thought as he slowly chewed a mouthful of food, the reflexes among the DL members were sharply increasing. They were getting better every time they were beaten by their fellow members, and that could only be a good thing. He read a sentence from his book, realised he was reading it for the fourth time, and shook his head to clear it. He needed to focus on his studies, not get all proud of the DL like he was still in charge of it. That was Neville's baby, now, and he had other things to think about.

He was doing the same thing he'd been doing for the last few months, reading during dinner and ignoring the conversation around him, but it felt different now. The people sitting at the table near him weren't ignoring him back, assuming that he was being conceited or something. With all the time he'd been spending with his housemates, they'd been forced to notice that he just studied all the time—it was nothing personal. Lately, Parvati and Ron would sit close by and push food onto his plate whenever he forgot about it. If they were busy, Gryffindor's newest couple Ginny and Dean would step in to make sure Harry was eating.

Harry had made them see that he was one of them. That he was a student and a soldier, just like them. He did very well at his studies, and he was better at fighting, but he was still one of them. The friendships that had seemed so impossible were becoming second nature already. Amazing, really, how natural it was to have friends. Almost like people were meant to be that way.

Harry did manage to finish his chapter, and rewarded himself by closing the book and talking to the people around him while he indulged in dessert. He was surprised to find a cupcake sitting on his plate already, but figured that Ron, sitting next to him, had put it there. Ron didn't really understand Harry's self-discipline about food. Harry could point out to him that it kept him lean and made it easy to exercise and keep his muscle mass, which led not only to the advantage in their fights but made him a good Seeker. Somehow, though, he didn't think the arguments were going to overcome Ron's love of food.

He shrugged and picked up the cupcake. He heard a dramatic gasp, and turned to see Parvati faking a swoon.

“Is Harry Potter putting down a book and eating dessert?” she asked playfully. “Could it really be?”

Harry just grinned at her and took a massive bite of his cupcake. He felt eyes on him, and looked over to the staff table. Dumbledore was watching him with a smile on his face. Harry smiled back, brushing away crumbs from his shirt. He was still studying too hard, still spending too much time worrying about Voldemort, still growing up too fast. But it felt different now. Better.

He glanced down the table and saw that Hermione was chatting gaily with Neville and Lavender about something that had happened in class that day. She looked okay. Harry wanted to be jealous, but instead he was glad. He wanted her to be happy. It seemed she was better, too.

Chapter Seven

“Hey, Harry. Harry.”

Ron’s attempts to get Harry’s attention went unnoticed, as the boy with dark hair (with fading, sickly-green tips) had his face buried in his homework or independent study or whatever it was he was studying this time. Seamus grinned and nudged Ron.

“O, Great One!” he sang out.

Harry raised his head, turning his slightly bleary eyes to them. “Huh?”

Seamus snickered. “What’d I tell ya? It’s probably his undefeated status in the DL that makes him arrogant like that.”

Harry just rolled his eyes. Even knowing that Seamus wouldn’t joke about it if he thought it was true, Ron could see why one would get tired of it. “What do you want, Finnegan?”

“Nothing, actually,” Seamus said loftily. “Ron here does, though.”

Ron rolled his eyes to commiserate when Harry turned to him with a frown. “I’m heading down to the Great Hall to get something to eat. Come on.”

Harry was looking disgruntled about being interrupted merely to get cajoled into eating, but he seemed to realise that Ron might have an ulterior motive, so he got up and came along.

“I’m just passing along a message from my mother,” Ron said, shrugging off the implied embarrassment of it. “Apparently, she’s worried about what you guys are doing for Christmas.”

Harry frowned, seeming to droop and show exhaustion that he had been hiding a moment ago. “I was going to say that it’s quite a ways off, to be worrying about it.”

“Until you remembered that all the studying we’re doing is because the term is over in a few days?”

“Yeah . . .”

Ron was starting to feel very bad for Harry. He was no closer to figuring out what Harry and Dumbledore were up to than he was when he and Neville had talked about it so many weeks ago, but he could tell how much time it ate up. Harry seemed more than just tired, though, he seemed on the verge of nervous collapse. Ron supposed that it was because You-Know-Who was out there, but the feverish way Harry threw himself into everything was worrying. He'd like to think Harry would still be alive and in a condition to fight when he finally faced the dark wizard, but not at this rate.

“Anyway, I'll take it that means you don't have plans. Mum was just going to ask Sirius, by the way, but they haven't both been at the same Order meeting in forever. Sorry to bother you about it. The point is, since you don't have plans, I'm supposed to invite you, Professor Black, and Professor Lupin over for Christmas dinner.”

Harry smiled. “That's awfully nice of her, Ron. Tell her thank you.”

“Well? Should I tell her to set places at the table, or what?”

Harry shrugged at that. “I have to check it with Sirius, but probably.”

Ron smirked as a stray thought went through his head. “I think she's just feeling sort of like she has to make it up to you for having us over last year.”

Harry took a breath at that, and Ron's smirk faded. It was hard, remembering last Christmas, when they'd been afraid Dad wouldn't make it. It seemed that Harry wasn't feeling great about it, either. Ron wondered why. He still wasn't sure about most of what happened, the night that Dad was attacked, but Harry seemed to have taken it far more personally than made sense.

“Harry?” he said, when the other boy didn't say anything for a long time.

“Sorry. I was just thinking about Kimberly.”

“Kimberly Kearney? Why?”

Ron winced as the words came out of his mouth. Her dad had died, just as his father had come so close to doing, and it had been obvious to him that Harry felt guilty about it, for some reason. Maybe it was just that Harry felt guilty for not being out there, trying to challenge You-Know-Who. Maybe Harry thought he ought to be stopping people from dying. As if he could. He might be the only remaining undefeated person in the DL, but he wasn't the great Merlin yet. He didn't seem to know that the rest of them didn't blame him. Well, most of the rest of them.

When Harry woke up, his first day at home, it was nearly noon. He ought to feel disgusted with himself, but instead he just grinned at his ceiling and stretched lazily. He'd been asleep for a good fourteen hours, and he'd missed his morning workout. It felt great. He'd needed it badly. Of course, he planned to study for at least three hours or so today and he was delaying the workout, not skipping it entirely. But it still felt nice. Like something normal people did.

He didn't bother dressing, just went downstairs in an old pair of pyjama bottoms that didn't even cover his ankles. He pushed his hair back from his face as he descended the stairs, resolving to go to a barber and have it cut as soon as possible. He sat down at the kitchen table and tried to decide if he wanted something to eat or if he just wanted to make some coffee.

Kreacher appeared and made the decision for him. “Young master is awake,” he said in greeting. “Kreacher will prepare a meal for him, and then he will do master's laundry.”

“Okay.”

A few minutes later, Harry had a full English breakfast in front of him and an admonishment to eat all of it so that young master did not waste away. Kreacher had already scurried away to collect Harry's dirty clothes, apparently fearing that Harry would protest. Harry wanted to say he wasn't that hungry, but then he ate the first bite and found himself ravenous. He practically licked the plate when he was

finished. He sighed, and leaned back in his chair to enjoy the coffee Kreacher had made at his request.

Christmas break was off to a promising start, and Harry was contemplating the idea that he might sleep in again tomorrow.

Then Remus came in.

He looked pale and shell-shocked, and he didn't seem to see Harry. He stared around the kitchen as if looking for something.

"Um, hey Remus."

Remus blinked at him. "Welcome back, Harry," he managed to say, then turned around to leave again.

Harry jumped up, dispelling all thoughts of a quiet holiday from school and his contentment about his day. Something was wrong. He grabbed hold of Remus and brought him back into the room, directing him into a chair at the table.

"Sit down, Remus. Do you want some coffee or anything?"

"Have any whiskey?" Remus muttered.

"For god's sake, it's barely noon!"

Remus chuckled weakly at that, which gave Harry some relief. Whatever it was, it wasn't so devastating that he couldn't manage at least a pitiable laugh.

"I've been sacked," he shrugged. "Again. I guess I should be used to it."

"What?" Harry barked, his anxiety translating into anger when he heard that. Remus had been doing so well . . . "The restaurant can't fire you, you practically run it! What on earth for?"

He shrugged. "Everything went wrong in the kitchen and they couldn't get hold of me to sort it out. This is the third time I haven't been

available when I should have been. They say they need someone more reliable.”

“I thought they understood you had a medical condition?”

Remus was starting to look a little more resigned to his fate now, less shocked. “I don’t have any medical paperwork to prove it. They think I have a drug problem.”

“A drug problem?” Harry seethed. “That’s stupid. Why don’t they just give you a drug test?”

Remus made a face. “They offered to. I turned it down, and so they said they had no choice.”

“You turned it . . . oh, right.”

There were so many magical plants running through Remus’ system that the test they’d give him wouldn’t begin to make sense of them. It would look like he was on drugs, and some really weird ones at that. Of course he couldn’t have a drug test. He’d probably be arrested or something.

“It’s happened before, I shouldn’t take it so hard,” Remus said quietly as Harry went to the coffeepot to get Remus a fortifying cup. “I’ll find something again, I always do.”

Harry knew what had really gotten Remus upset. He’s gotten serious with Tonks. He’s afraid of telling her about this, because he thinks she won’t stay with him if he can’t even support himself. This is so messed up! I don’t know why they persecute werewolves so badly, and it has to change. There’s no reason for a man like Remus not to be well-respected in his community. I can’t believe Remus can be so calm about it. If I’m this upset, how must he feel?

Sirius walked in. He looked back and forth between Remus, slumped over the table, and Harry standing at the counter with a mug gripped in a white-knuckled hand. He clenched his jaw and drew his wand.

"Your manager's the bloke with the comb-over, right?" Sirius asked in an ugly voice. "I'll be back in a while."

Remus shook his head. "No, don't. This might be for the best. The Order's been needing something from me for a long time, and now I can do it. Truth be told, I think I always knew I was going to do it, and it was only a matter of time."

Sirius just looked even more ugly when Remus said that, and Harry set the mug down deliberately and glared at both of them.

"Why don't I know what you're talking about?"

"Because it's none of your business," Sirius said roughly, glancing at Remus, who was pale again.

"Don't be ridiculous, Padfoot," Remus sighed. "Of course it's his business."

Sirius shrugged at Harry. "Dumbledore thinks we need a werewolf liaison, like Hagrid tried to do with the giants."

Harry felt cold when he realised that Dumbledore wanted Remus to go to the werewolf community and try to gain their trust. If Remus tried it, he was going to get himself killed. Harry had heard about what was going on with the werewolves. They were letting themselves be persuaded to join Voldemort, led by a real brute named Fenrir Greyback. Their leader had reportedly given in to his animal side, was addicted to violence and pain . . . and Remus was seriously considering going to him and possibly even challenging him.

Harry looked at the quiet, scholarly man at the kitchen table, took in the graying hair and the fear on his face. Harry shook his head.

"You can't, Remus. Don't do it."

Remus raised his head and looked at Harry soberly. "Who else could do it?"

“That’s not . . .” Harry trailed off. The fear was leaving his expression, and being replaced by a cold determination, and Harry wasn’t sure he would listen. “Would it help if I said I’ll miss you when Greyback kills you?”

Remus stood up. “Thanks for the sentiment, Archie, but he’s not going to kill me.”

Harry made a choking noise of disbelief. “You’re not even worried about it?”

“Of course I am, I’d have to be an idiot not to be afraid. But this needs to be done, and I’m the one to do it. I don’t have any right to complain. When I said I’d do anything to bring Voldemort down, I did mean anything. The werewolves need a place to go, and better us than them.”

He did have the ability to sound bone-chillingly logical when he wanted to. Harry shuddered, knowing how likely it was that Remus was going to get killed if he did this. And he’d gotten used to having Remus around in the last year and a half.

Harry stepped closer to Remus and stared him down. “I don’t let my family get killed.”

If he’d been any younger, Remus would have just laughed him away. Instead, Remus stared back, not budging. Harry reflected that all he was really accomplishing was making Remus more determined to carry this out—and if that was true, it was worth keeping it up, because Remus would need every ounce of determination he could find.

“Harry, this is your war we’re part of,” Remus said slowly. “You should be happy to have the help.”

Harry flinched, broke eye contact, stepped back. That was a low blow. This was not his war, and Remus knew that.

“Sirius, you’re being awfully quiet,” Remus said, too casually.

Sirius sounded raw and hoarse. "I have nothing to say." He left the room.

After a moment of silence between Harry and Remus, Harry left as well, going up to his room to get a start on the studying he'd been planning to do. After that, he would look into the Pensieve he'd borrowed from Dumbledore to look over the memories a few more times. He and Dumbledore would be comparing lists of their beliefs about the location and identity of each Horcrux when he got back to school.

Below him, in their practice room, Sirius paced back and forth, raging. He would gladly be the one to go, but Remus wouldn't hear of it. Remus was the one who could make a difference. He punched the padded practice dummy once, twice, a third time, and then collapsed against it, using it to hold himself up. He tried to keep his cries silent.

The only real reason that Remus came along to Christmas dinner at the Weasleys, Harry thought, was to get away from Tonks. He was preparing to go to the werewolves this very night and was so totally and quietly anxious that Harry didn't know how he'd make it through dinner without throwing it up. Harry wasn't mad at him anymore, his anger had been little more than a defense against the fear of his death. But Remus wasn't here for dinner, he was here to escape Tonks. She kept trying to talk to him.

"All right, Harry?" Ron asked jovially, strolling in when Arthur had just finished welcoming them in.

"Oh, hey, Ron."

He heard a footstep behind him, and quickly grasped his wand to raise a shield, straining to include Sirius and Remus in it, just in case. A very feminine sigh of exasperation came from behind him, and he turned with a grin.

"Never going to happen, Ginny, not to the undefeated champion of the DL."

“Never say never, Harry,” she grinned back. “Now come on into the other room, Bill and Charlie are here for dinner, as well. And Bill,” she added with a glint in her eye that looked dangerous, “brought a girlfriend.” She paused. “Those are my older brothers, by the way, Bill and Charlie.”

Harry just smiled and said, “I know.” But inside, he was gleeful. Bill and Charlie both knew him, but he didn’t think they’d told anybody. Ron or Ginny would have mentioned it by now if they had. This might be fun.

Apparently, they’d both been thinking the same thing. They descended upon Sirius and Harry as soon as they entered the room.

“Great to see you,” Bill said, shaking Sirius’ hand. “There has been a dearth of ponytails in Egypt without you.”

“Harry, my favourite pen pal!” Charlie boomed, clapping him on the back. “You never told me how you liked your first year of Hogwarts!”

Sirius and Harry greeted them warmly, offered a few exclamations of their own, and asked questions about work and life. The family just gaped at them. The four of them all turned around with matching smiles of amusement.

“You, er, know each other?” Arthur ventured.

“Oh, we’re old mates,” Charlie assured them, slinging an arm over Harry’s shoulders. “Go to Quidditch games . . .”

“Get a few pints . . .”

“You know, like mates do,” Harry concluded.

Sirius, left without a good line, just chuckled and took pity on the confused family and explained how they’d met. Harry was busy staring at the one person who was obviously not a member of the Weasley family. She was stunning. Every individual feature was perfect, but the whole was more than perfect. Her figure, her face, that beautiful sheet of hair that nearly glowed, and something

indefinable but overwhelming. After a moment, Harry was able to define it, and that gave him the ability to look away. She was veela, or part-veela at least, and Harry had never allowed himself to be susceptible to their charms after his experience with Stephanie. Must be that girlfriend of Bill's. Harry couldn't shake the idea that he recognised her, but he had no idea why he would.

She stepped forward boldly. "You are 'Arry Potter?" she said in a purring voice. He couldn't place her accent immediately.

"I am. I feel like I should know you . . ."

"My name eez Fleur Delacour, you may 'ave seen my photograph in ze paper."

French, then, that was obvious now. And Fleur Delacour, of course! The Beauxbatons champion from the Triwizard Tournament. He had, indeed, seen her picture in the paper, even if he hadn't followed her successes and failures in the tournament very well.

"Oh, yes," he said, and stopped there. Didn't seem tactful to try to find common ground mentioning the tournament, since she'd come in last and been injured in the process.

She saved him, stepping forward to clutch his hands and smile very prettily. "It eez so lovely to meet you, 'Arry. May I call you 'Arry?"

"Of course," he said gallantly, and kissed one of her hands with a wink. She giggled throatily. "So, I've been told you're here with Bill. How did you meet him?"

"I 'ave come to leev 'ere for a while, to eemprove on my Engleesh. I work for Gringotts, now."

"You seem to be doing very well with your English," Harry said, guessing that the real reason she had come to England was the long-haired Weasley in question, and stepped back to make room for Bill.

Bill slipped his arm around the willowy woman. "I see you've met Fleur."

"You're a lucky man, Bill," Harry said, privately thinking that Bill could have her. She was such an obvious flirt. Harry liked his women a little less catty. He let the two of them retreat into their own private little lovers' world, which true lovers could go to no matter where they were, even if it was sitting on their parents' tatty sofa with tons of people around them. All it took was one brilliant smile from Fleur and a tightening of Bill's arm around her, and they were gone. Harry found Charlie again and they chatted about Charlie's work in Romania for a few minutes.

Molly poked her head out of the kitchen. "Is everyone here, now?" she asked. Her eyes darted around the room. "Waiting for one more," she declared, before anyone could answer her, and ducked back into the kitchen. The smells coming from the room were unbelievable, and Harry thought he would cry with happiness when he got to the table. He didn't know who they were waiting for, though. That was strange.

That question was answered only moments later. The fireplace whooshed, and then Tonks stepped through, brushing ash from her blouse and looking very strange in a conservative skirt and plain brown hair. Harry hardly recognised her. Last time he'd seen her (the night Remus had spoken to her and it had ended in her shouting and slamming doors and him beginning to cry then going cold), she'd been in her usual clunky boots and purple hair. Harry wondered whether she had made the change just to be polite to Molly or because she was trying to say something to Remus.

This was Tonks, he reminded himself, who was rather brilliant and devious when she wanted to be. She would have done it for both reasons, and probably another one he hadn't guessed yet.

She shook a few hands and thanked the Weasleys very prettily for the invitation. Remus had retreated, looking pale and angry, into a corner, but Tonks was ignoring him. Very much on purpose. She'd followed him here, and now she was going to let him stew in that realisation.

"Wotcher, Harry," she said in greeting, giving him a quick hug.

“Merry Christmas,” he returned. “You look nice.”

“You sound surprised. I can look nice.” She pretended to pout.

“I reckoned you could. Just never thought I’d see it. But I was being serious, you do look good.”

“Thank you. You clean up pretty well, yourself.”

“You sound surprised,” he drawled, grinning. He did, in fact, clean up well. He was wearing a black button-down and a pin-striped vest with his jeans, and he’d finally gotten his hair cut. It was a far cry from his usual ratty t-shirts and dishevelment.

He was perfectly willing to help her make Remus squirm, since he was on Tonks’ side in this particular argument (and he knew the argument very well, having heard it being shouted at the top of her lungs the other night). So they laughed and joked and he got her a glass of wine, and he escorted her to the table. The only people Remus talked to were Bill and Fleur. Fleur was being ignored very obviously by Ginny, so by the time they all got to the table for dinner, emotions were a little frayed.

The meal was excellent, which was a given when Molly was cooking, and was followed by a lot of groans about being too full and final glasses of wine. The Weasleys hadn’t said a word about what had gotten into Remus and Tonks, but they were very understanding about the two of them slipping away from the table and not being there for dessert. Harry and Sirius did their best to be overly jovial to cover for the absence. It was, all in all, not comfortable.

After dinner, Harry and Ginny and Ron retreated upstairs, which was the safe zone for impoliteness and adolescence, so that Harry could ask them why in hell everybody was being so mean to Fleur. She was nice enough, and Bill was obviously infatuated.

“Exactly,” Ginny sniffed. “Infatuated. She goes all dazzly and he just does whatever she wants.”

“You can’t be serious,” Harry chuckled. “You think that just because she’s got veela blood, she can keep him under her thumb for months at a time?”

Ginny shrugged irritably. “What do I know about veelas?”

“That they’re bloody gorgeous,” Ron said lazily, with a silly little smile on his face.

Ginny snorted. “We all know you went mad over her during the tournament, but—”

With a glance at Harry, she cut herself off.

“Shut up, Harry, I know.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were looking at me. You had that look that says you’re disappointed in me.”

Harry didn’t deny it.

“I’m better than I used to be. Anyway, sorry Ron, I know it’s no good taking it out on you. The point is, I think Bill could do better. That’s all.”

“He’s in love with Fleur,” Ron pointed out. “Maybe he could do better, but he doesn’t want to.”

Ginny huffed and crossed her arms, and Harry offered to let her duel him to a standstill so get it out of her system.

“I’d lose, so why bother?” she sighed. Then she gave him and Ron both a sunny smile. “I’m glad we’re all friends now. You guys are so much better than the girls in my year.”

“At least until you start in about how cute Dean is and how you doodle his name in hearts on your notes in class . . .”

“Ugh, I do not,” she muttered.

“Ginny’s more the type to get it tattooed on her ass,” Harry snickered.

She growled in outrage, but then they decided to find Fred and George and Charlie to play some Quidditch out behind the house. Harry was determined to fill up his day as much as possible, so he didn’t have time to think about the fact that this time tomorrow, Remus might be dead.

“We need to talk.”

“We did talk.”

“We need to talk again. You weren’t listening the first time.”

“I heard you fine. I just disagree.”

Tonks scowled as the cold air flapped her skirt around her legs. She stopped and Transfigured it into a pair of corduroys that would go a lot farther toward keeping her warm.

“What do you want me to say, Dora?” he asked. He was the only one besides her parents who could call her that, and when he said it in that soft, heart-melting way of his, she couldn’t be angry with him. Except that she was. He was being so completely pig-headed about this, and she had to be tough until they’d solved it. “I have told you over and over that I don’t want to see you anymore.”

Those words hurt her in a way that these ridiculous pumps she was wearing never could. She stopped again to Transfigure them into more sensible shoes. At any other time, it would have made him laugh, but he didn’t. Well, she hadn’t expected it to.

“But I know perfectly well that it’s a lie. You love me, Remus.”

“You seem awfully sure about that.”

“You would have said it to me when we had dinner a week ago, if you weren’t so insecure. I could tell.”

He sighed, and it sounded frustrated. "Okay." He turned to look her directly in the eyes. "I love you." He let out a nervous laugh. "That's just like me, to say it for the first time now. I love you, and that's the truth. I don't want to see you anymore, and that's also the truth."

She would not cry she would not cry she would not cry— Blast it all, she was crying. "Why?"

"What do you mean, why? You know where I'm going."

"Yes."

"And do you know what I will have to do?" he asked in a very soft voice.

She clenched her teeth and willed her tears away. You are a big, tough Auror, and Aurors don't cry. The tears obeyed her. "I can guess."

He was angry with her, she could tell. She could always tell when he was angry with her. "No, I don't think you can. I can't guess very well, myself."

"What does it have to do with us, though?"

"Let me tell you what I think I will have to do. I will have to fight everyone who thinks they can take me."

Faded clothes, premature gray hair, soft-spoken ways . . . she loved him for every bit of it, but it made him look like an easy target. He wasn't, but they would think so. Yes, he would have to fight.

"And then I will have to prove that I'm their leader. They are used to Greyback, and we know what he's like. I'm going to have to convince them there's a better way, but it will be slow. Until then, I am going to have to . . ." He struggled to explain it. "I will be causing pain. A lot of pain. For some time, who knows how long, I am going to have to do the one thing I swore I would never do. I'm going to have to give in to

the animal. Not all the way, not forever, but I can't go in there thinking I won't have to do things that repulse me."

He looked so very, heart-breakingly, tired and afraid. She ached with every muscle in her body to touch him, but he would pull away, and that would shatter her.

"You can't see that, Dora. I don't want you to. I don't want you to see me that way."

Now she finally had the reason. The absolute torment she'd been through in the last few days was because he didn't want her to witness the things he might have to do when he went to the werewolves.

She couldn't help but laugh a little. "You stupid man," she cried out, catching hold of his hands and not letting go when he tried to pull back. "You stupid, stupid man," she repeated, leaning her forehead against his chest and suddenly choking on tears again. "This was all because you wanted to protect me?"

Hesitantly, his hands pressed against her back. "Why is that stupid?"

"I don't need it," she murmured. "I don't want it."

His hands were trying to pluck her away, but she wasn't going anywhere. "Don't you understand? I'm not going to be the same. I can't act like one thing when I'm with them, and then become something else when I'm with you, I'm just not that good an actor. I have to become this person, all the time. I'm not going to be who you want me to be—"

"I've never wanted you to be anything," she said sharply, pulling back on her own now. "I love you for who you already are, and this won't change that. You are doing this for the right reasons, and whatever you're forced to do . . . Remus, don't you know that we're all having to do things we don't want to? We're fighting a war, and I'm an Auror. I've had to do plenty of things I'd rather not." She found herself gripping his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her. "I don't care what you think you might have to do. When we know what you really

have to do, we'll worry about it then. It's not as though you won't have done them if I don't know. But you're not doing it alone. We've talked about this. You've been alone long enough, and you're never going to be alone again. Whatever you have to do, you do it, and then you come home and I'll be there to fix it. You can't go for so long without having me there to heal you. I want to be there, and you can't make me go. You don't even need to make me go. I'm not afraid of you, Remus, and I never will be."

He might have started to argue again, but she had a fail-safe plan for winning their arguments. She leaned in and kissed him. It wasn't a quick peck to surprise him. It was a deep, binding kiss that claimed him as her own and made sure his lips were occupied until they forgot what they'd been about to do. Kissed him until he probably thought it was his idea to begin with. He might be foolish and stubborn and insecure and shy, but he was hers, because she loved him, and she wouldn't let him go. He would find it awfully hard to push her away if she was all but wrapped around him.

He watched them from the shadows, wanting to count them and figure out who was important. There were twenty-one, with thirteen men to seven women, and one who was barely a teenager, if that, and so skinny that he couldn't tell whether it was a boy or a girl. That was all he had time for, before their leader, the notorious Fenrir Greyback, lifted his head and stared right into the dark patch where he hid.

"I can smell you," he growled, stalking forward.

He wouldn't wait for Greyback to come to him, so he stepped out to meet him. His pulse hammered, and he was certain that Greyback would hear it and feel it. He'd given in to his wolf so completely that even in human form, his senses were unbelievable. But what did it matter if he was afraid? Surely he had the right to be. Surely everyone who found them, came here, was afraid at first.

He cast his eyes around their little settlement. Or maybe that fear never left them.

"What are you?"

That was a tidy little question. It summed up his name and qualities, and would basically answer the question of what he was there for. And there was really only one answer he could give, wasn't there?

"I am a werewolf," he said calmly. And in case that wasn't enough, "I've come to join you."

Greyback started to circle him. He followed the older werewolf's movements, tracking the placement of his feet, shifting his own in response. They kept their eyes on each other.

"What's your name?"

"Remus Lupin."

Greyback stopped circling and bared his teeth. In the periphery of his vision, Remus could see a few others do the same. Apparently they'd heard of him.

"I had no idea I was such a pariah," he said, trying to maintain the calm attitude he was projecting.

"You have been begging scraps from their table for years, and now you come crawling to me, like a starving pup?" Greyback's teeth were hideously yellow and his face was a mask of degradation.

"I had no intention of crawling."

This was what he had to become, if he was to do this. Not ugly and rotted like Greyback, but dangerous and cruel and cunning. And he would. It started now. There was no more room for fear, no more thoughts of beautiful woman who were crazy as hell, nor more regretting that his new family would miss him. Just this. Just standing off with Greyback, and winning. He hadn't wanted this, had never wanted to be this. But they couldn't afford to have this desperate little settlement go to Voldemort, and he was the only thing that could stop them from doing it.

Greyback was snarling at him, snarling and crouching like he meant to attack him. It would be next to useless in this form, although Remus had no doubt that Greyback had spent more time learning violence as a wolf than he had.

"You think you can stroll in here and do as you please?"

"I didn't think anything," he said levelly. "I've come to be with my people."

"Took you long enough," someone behind him muttered.

Merlin, he really was famous, wasn't he? Of all things, he'd never expected that. Maybe they thought he was Dumbledore's pet or something. But he'd bet everything he had that Dumbledore had shown him more consideration than Greyback had given to any of them. Hell, he was betting it all right now.

"I can smell it on you," Greyback said, just when Remus began to relax, to think that he'd say yes and allow Remus in. "I can smell your superiority. You think you're better than me." He began to circle again. "You think because your master groomed you and fed you well, that it made you better than me. But I've never been a slave, Lupin. I've never accepted what they said was good enough for the likes of me. You're a slave, and I'm free."

He began to shuffle his feet and follow Greyback's circling movement again. He felt the tension in his body, strained to the breaking point. He was expecting Greyback to leap on him at any moment. He was in the crouching position of a wolf ready to spring. The only thing to do was pick a fight and start it on his terms.

"I am better than you, Greyback. Twenty-nine days a month, I'm human, and I remember how to act like one. You were so weak that you gave in to what you are on that other day of the month."

As he spoke, he slipped off the patched cloak, the heavy robes, that declared him to be a wizard. He shed everything but his trousers and a t-shirt he'd borrowed from Sirius. It was all Greyback was wearing, and he was signaling his intention to see this through. He refused to

shed his shoes, though Greyback was barefoot. He thought he might need them.

The other werewolf paused a moment, surprised by Remus, and Remus gave him a vicious, toothy smile. He might not look like much at first, but he'd been living and training with Sirius and Harry for a long time, now. He filled out the t-shirt quite nicely. He rather regretted that Greyback, not Dora, was the first person to see him in so little clothing, but he wasn't thinking about Dora now. Every moment, he slipped further and further into the character he was making for himself. The character was him, or rather it was the him he'd promised he would never be.

"This isn't what I want, Greyback," he said calmly. At least, it sounded calm. Inside, he was shaking with fear. "I only came here to join you, not fight you. But I have no intention of bowing to you." He broke the intense focus they'd maintained on each other to look at the werewolf closest to him. They'd created a ring around him and Greyback, and he made eye contact. "Did you all give in so easily? You just gave him your neck like submissive animals? Aren't you all thinking people, as well? Yet you crawl for him. Why? Don't you know that he's leading you straight to hell? Don't you know that Voldemort" (for he would not quail at using the name, not now) "will eradicate us, too? And you're on the verge of letting this fool take you to him."

The man he'd spoken to looked away. The muttering from the ring of spectators was tinged with anger. He'd probably turned them all against him, and it probably meant he'd have to fight each of them by turn. But he couldn't think of that now. Greyback came first.

And then he came. He leapt forward with a howl of rage, arms reaching and teeth bared. Remus ducked and put his shoulder into it. It was no great matter to use Greyback's momentum to roll the brute over his back and into the dirt behind him. He spun around to be sure Greyback couldn't get at him from behind. But he was still thinking too much like a human, because Greyback didn't get up again to hit him. He scrabbled forward and sunk his teeth deep into Remus' leg.

Remus let out a cry and jerked away, feeling the muscle in his leg tear. His heart yammered with terror, for the man was more beast

than he'd wanted to believe. He was going to have to fight him this way, as some kind of animal? With teeth and claws? Remus didn't have to use teeth to fight dirty, but he did have to fight dirty.

So be it.

When Greyback came again, with teeth bared, Remus kicked him in the face. Greyback was jolted back into the dirt, shouting with pain. He grabbed for Remus' leg as if to pull it out from under him, but he sidestepped quickly and brought his foot down again on Greyback's arm. It didn't break, but he didn't pull away quickly enough.

What use is giving in to the wolf if it means you can't fight as a human? Remus thought with bewilderment. Greyback was laughably inept at this. He relied completely on his big muscles and on the shock he caused with his corrupt nature. If anyone had wanted to fight him after he snarled in their face, one good punch from those huge arms had likely taken care of it. But Remus had learned how to dodge.

Greyback got back up and they ended up grappling for control, grabbing at necks and trying to land punches. Greyback kept trying to sink his teeth in, but Remus was quick. Still, between the dirty fingernails and the number of bites, he had ended up with a lot of small cuts that stung fiercely. Finally, Remus realised what a silly fight this had turned into. He stopped trying to land a punch. He slipped out from under Greyback's flailing arms, caught one of them, spun around behind him, and broke it with a snap so loud that some of the onlookers groaned.

He was too confident. Greyback ignored the pain enough to turn around with shocking speed, and the next thing Remus knew, he was on the ground with Greyback's teeth buried in his neck. He gasped for breath and beat his fist into Greyback's temple until the man was too stunned to keep up the assault and became sort of limp. Remus rolled him over and got on top of him and punched until Greyback's face and his own hands were a bloody mess. He was lost in a red fog such as he had never felt in his life. He'd never let go like this.

When he came back to himself, he was still straddling Greyback's limp form, each heaving breath making him aware of the blood that stuck his shirt to his chest. There were twenty men and women and one child staring at him in shock and fear. But a disturbing amount of respect.

He got up, checking to make sure that Greyback was breathing normally after that many blows to the head, and faced them.

"Most of you came here because you wanted to be with people who understand you. You wanted a community who supported one another. Greyback promised to change the way you were treated. It wasn't until you were under his thumb that you realised how he was going to change it. Am I right?"

The murmurs were a confusing mixture of surprise, assent, and ugly disagreement. Some of them had come here knowing exactly what would happen.

"And now that you've beaten him into submission, just like the animal you said you were better than, are you going to lead us to join Dumbledore instead? Fighting off whoever disagrees?"

Remus stepped away from Greyback, and staggered. "No. I wanted none of this. I came here to join you, but not if it meant becoming his slave. Those of you who want that life, you can follow him. I'm here for the same reason you came here, to find a community. If I have to fight off predators, then I will. That's all there is to it."

While they stared at him, Remus wondered how this might have gone differently. He could have let Greyback make the rules. If he had, he would have had to bow and scrape for favour, and become one of the ravenous, hollow-eyed men on the fringes of the crowd. He could have submitted instead of fighting. If he'd worked hard enough, he might have been able to bring some of these people away from Greyback. But this way was better. This way, it was clear from the beginning that the community was divided and that Remus wasn't here to become one of Greyback's lackeys. The people he might have been able to convince were already going to see him as a leader. Saved time, beating Greyback to a pulp.

In truth, he knew he had changed. Something about having Dora and Sirius in his life had made him different. In truth, the idea of submitting, of backing down from the fight, had not occurred to him until this moment.

Harry was the first person he saw when he stumbled back to the house, wanting nothing more than medical treatment before he went back to the other werewolves. He'd continued to play the hard case. Anyone who wanted to try to salvage a real community out of their group could stay. Those who didn't could drag their unconscious leader off to somewhere else, and be gone before he returned.

Harry was in the kitchen, which was where he'd hoped to quietly find Kreacher and swear him to silence. He wouldn't have even bothered returning if he weren't afraid of infection.

Harry jumped up from the table. "Holy crap, Remus!"

"Shhh," he admonished.

"What do you mean, 'shh'? You're bleeding like mad!"

"It's just a few bites and scratches. You should see the other guy."

Harry paused. "You beat Greyback?" He grinned savagely. "Stay here, I'll get some stuff to clean you up." He looked Remus up and down. "You can finish this tea, it's still hot."

Remus sank down gratefully and pulled the cup to him. His hands spasmed and he found himself barely able to hold onto the cup, much less drink out of it. He was shaking so hard his teeth were starting to rattle. Then a pair of hands that were decidedly not Harry's slid over his shoulders. He let out a gasping breath and leaned back into her arms, not caring how she got there or what she was thinking.

Neither of them moved or spoke. He slowly relaxed, with her arms around him and his head resting against her. The shaking stopped.

"I knew you'd need me," she murmured.

Harry came back in with his arms full of bottles and bandages. He was only too experienced in this kind of thing, after the job Sirius had taken in Austria.

"I can't stay," Remus said hoarsely.

"This won't take long," Harry said with assurance. He handed him a bottle clearly labeled as Blood Replenishing Potion.

Remus grimaced. "I'm not badly injured or anything, I don't need this."

Dora made a sound of dismay. "Your neck looks like raw hamburger."

Surprised, he tried to turn his head, and saw that the blood that made his shirt so sticky was his, after all. It hurt to move his head. He humbly drank the potion, and followed all of Harry's further advice. Sirius had come in, at some point, and was standing against the wall with his arms crossed, just observing. Remus nodded to him.

He related, briefly, what had happened while Harry cleaned him up. As soon as he was certain that he wasn't going to die of blood loss or raging infection, Remus got up again.

"Thanks, Harry."

He tried to exit, but Harry gripped his arm, hard.

"This isn't worth it, Remus."

Remus sighed. "You didn't see Greyback. You didn't see how they feared him, and what he's like. I just took most of them away from him, and away from Voldemort. If he'd told them to, they would have hurt us. Now they won't. And that, Harry, is worth whatever I have to do."

Harry bit his lip. "You're right." His grip became painfully tight. "Thank you."

Instead of leaving, he turned back to Dora, not even caring that the other two men were still there, watching.

"I won't see you for a while, but I'll wish I could, every day." Then he cupped her face and kissed her. He took his time and did it right. "Wait for me," he whispered. Then he left. There was a group of desperate people who wanted a leader waiting for him, and it wouldn't do to leave them for long.

Harry stood in front of his mirror and stared at himself. He looked frightened. He had good reason to be.

"I'm forgetting what this is all for," he said.

He stared at himself for another minute. He looked the same as he had before he'd spoken.

"I'm forgetting what's at stake."

"I'm forgetting that I'm a part of all this. I spend so much time shut up in an office or buried in a book, and I'm losing touch with all of it."

"I'm starting to forget that these are real people we're trying to save."

After all that was said, the thing he wanted to do seemed justified. Something he had to do, with courage and resolve the way Remus seemed to be doing his own task. Harry was in the same position: the only one who could serve their side in just this way. And he'd been refusing to do it all this time. Who did he think he was?

He lay down on the bed, closed his eyes, and slowed his breathing. Just before he slipped into sleep, he released the barriers. He'd held them in place so long, it was as natural as breathing now. It took real effort to remember how he'd constructed them, and bring them down. It took a long time, but he finally did it. When he fell asleep, his mind was naked, open to Voldemort's influence. It had to be done.

When Harry woke up in the morning, he wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed that he hadn't dreamed. It seemed that, unlike Harry, Voldemort wasn't ready to throw caution to the wind.

Chapter Eight

Harry's entire interest in Luna Lovegood had been her attitude toward life. He had found her so entirely different from the other girls at Hogwarts that it had made her attractive to him—she was so glibly capable and purposefully innocent. He wasn't sure how he could have explained that to Hermione when it had come up between them. What he did know was that there was nothing between the two of them now. And yet today, his respect for Luna's ability to roll with the punches in life had deepened. Today, he'd met Xenophilius Lovegood.

It was out of style to be a student of Deathly Hallows lore—at least in England. The best information, or so "Xeno" (as he'd insisted Harry call him) claimed, was still to be found in central Europe. Harry was inclined to believe him, since the first he'd heard of the Elder Wand was when living in Austria. Of course, it had been impolite to speak of it there, since that area had been so heavily affected by Grindelwald's reign of terror and it was rumoured that Grindelwald had possessed the wand.

Still, fashionable or not, Xeno Lovegood had been a veritable font of information. Harry had walked away from their meeting with a much better grasp on the Tale of the Three Brothers, and the symbol of the bisected triangle within the circle. Not only that, but a starting place, should he decide to seek for the wand.

It was that meeting that had led him to where he was now. He had another appointment to make today, back at Hogwarts, but his need to come here right away had been too much to ignore.

His hand brushed gently over the headstones, and he didn't care that his knees had gone numb with the cold. Sirius had never offered to bring him here. Perhaps he'd been waiting for Harry to ask him to. Or maybe it was something Sirius himself didn't want to see. Whatever the reason, this was the first time Harry had seen where his parents were buried. It was harder than he'd expected.

He'd thought that having Sirius was enough. It had always been enough, from the moment he'd known the identity of the ragged man on the back step.

Only now, it wasn't.

He wasn't crying. At least not for now. He was simply staring at those dates, those horribly haunting dates that showed how young they'd been. It wasn't fair, that he didn't know them. Not fair that they weren't here to see him. Not fair that he didn't still come home to them every summer and sneak out to let Sirius corrupt him on the weekends. He could picture the scene in his mind, of him and his little sister in the backyard of their house, shoving each other and making their mother roll her eyes as she walked past with a tray of drinks, while his father and his godfather were standing over the food on the grill arguing about whether or not Sirius should get married. It was what he should have had. He'd never needed it before. But seeing the place where they were buried changed something in him.

His eyes fell on the empty spaces around their graves. One was for him, and there were some for his children and grandchildren. But one day (if he himself was alive to make it happen) he'd make sure his godfather was put here, beside his friends. Harry knew without asking that it was what Sirius would want. And Remus? Fenrir Greyback and his little band of fighters were a constant menace to the community Remus led, and Harry was afraid a major attack was on its way. They would lay Remus, who was not welcome in his family plot, in one of these empty spaces only too soon.

He stood up, altogether too abruptly. He didn't realise that he'd clenched his hands into fists in the soil, not until he saw the little crumbles of dirt falling away from his fingers. Surprised, he relaxed his hands and wiped them on the legs of his trousers. He hadn't come here for this. He wanted information, if he could get it. He'd come here because of Xeno Lovegood.

He began walking the graves. If his family had been buried here for generations . . . he found it. He almost walked past it without stopping, so intent was he on continuing his search come hell or high water. He actually had to backtrack a few steps. He didn't kneel down again in

front of the new stone; feeling was only just coming back to his knees. But it was there, and he felt something inside him clench up with a strange, anticipatory fear.

PEVERELL

So it was here.

When Harry had listened to Xeno talk about the Hallows, he'd allowed himself to think about each object individually. For so long, he'd only been interested in the Wand. But he found himself getting a queer tight feeling in his stomach as Xeno described the powers of the Cloak. It was like no other cloak in the world, the claim went, and so far as Harry knew, that was true. He'd only come across one that matched the description. He owned it.

And so he'd come to the graveyard, looking for Peverell graves. It made a lot of sense, now, that Dumbledore had kept it all these years and had been so slow to give it to him. If it was THE Cloak, Death's Cloak (and Harry had a strong suspicion that it was), then it must have been a very hard decision, on Dumbledore's part. He'd trusted James, but not Harry, not much. He did now, or seemed to. Maybe he was simply bowing to what he believed was inevitable.

Harry had a decision of his own to make. He had to decide if he believed in all this, in the tales of the Hallows and their power. Later, he wouldn't recall walking over there, but he was suddenly standing before the graves of James and Lily Potter again, staring down at them. Wondering if they were angry over their death, as he was. It was the Wand he wanted. At first, his thought had been to escape from the deathgrip that Voldemort and prophecy had on him. With the Elder Wand, he could win in spite of his shortcomings as the Dark Lord's foe, and he could do it on his terms. But it became something more as he stood there.

Voldemort had stolen his happy life with his family, and left him with this queer and lonely life in which few options existed. For that, he wanted to make Voldemort hurt. And he could. He could do it with the Deathstick.

On the day of Harry's first appointment to enter the lake, Reed had declared that he was not ready. His people would be impressed that Harry was so willing to try, he said, but Harry would look foolish to them. If he did not mind that, then he could go. Harry had declined, and had set himself to more intensive study of Mermish. The Merpeople did not celebrate Christmas, but Reed had spent enough time talking to Dumbledore and to some of the forest creatures, that he understood why Harry would not be able to try again for a while.

Today, a month after returning to school, Reed said that Harry was ready, and Harry agreed. He'd already informed Sirius and Dumbledore that he would likely be entering the lake today, so he wasn't worried about drowning or random underwater attacks. Those two would come look for him if he didn't come back. He had a small dueling sheath for his wand strapped to his arm, to renew the Bubble-Head Charm he planned to perform.

"Your preparation is complete but for one thing," Reed said, and held out his hand to Harry. In the webbed palm was coiled a slimy substance that Harry didn't immediately recognise. "Eat this."

Harry frowned. He liked Reed well enough, after a few months of weekly lessons, but really. "What is it?"

"So suspicious, Harry," Reed chuckled. Harry still hadn't quite accepted how funny his name sounded with a Mermish accent. "It is only gillyweed. When I spoke to Dumbledore, he assured me that you would enjoy this more than a spell."

Harry recognised the sketch from his Herbology textbook in that very alive-looking coil of slime, now. "Oh, right." He quickly scooped it up and popped it into his mouth. It tasted awful, but better than some of the things he'd tasted in the pursuit of advanced knowledge of Potions.

As soon as the gasping tightness in his chest began, he dove into the lake. He was not an excellent swimmer, but he did know how to dive without getting water up his nose. He saw the shine of Reed's scales as he went under, and oriented himself in that direction. When he

turned, Reed was there, grinning with his mossy teeth and looking cheerful where he was normally rather sober.

“Will you follow me?” he asked, the musical tones dancing across the small currents created by his tail, spinning in little swirl of bubbles to Harry.

Harry gasped in delight. He never would have imagined how much better Mermish sounded when spoken in the proper habitat.

“I will, teacher,” he said in a serious voice, but he was grinning in return.

Reed whirled with a flash of his tail, and the grace that belonged to the Merpeople became evident as Harry struggled to follow.

“I will take you to my home, where you can meet my wife,” Reed called behind him as he swam deeper and deeper, with powerful waves of his tail. He did not concern himself with whether or not Harry could keep up. With him (and likely with his entire clan, Harry thought) you kept up or you didn’t come. “Then I will bring you to our meeting place so that any who wish to meet you, can.”

“I am honoured,” Harry said, almost shouting to be sure his voice would make its way up to Reed. It was a strange and alien feeling, to be panting for breath and to feel water moving through the gills that had formed in his neck. His lungs tried to heave with effort, and the sides of his neck expanded and pushed the cold lake through. It was utterly amazing.

There was a small collection of huts at the bottom of the lake, formed out of stone and weed and bone. It was crude-looking, but somehow graceful and beautifully alien—like Reed himself. Harry had settled into a rhythm, and swam more casually now, giving him the time to look at the huts as they swam by. Some were more elaborate than others, with braided vine or branches forming arching doorways, or with stone of different hues creating patterns in the walls. Reed gave a last powerful stroke of his tail and pulled open the woven-branch door of the hut Harry guessed was his own. Delicate fronds of lake

weed created curtains that Harry had to brush away as he followed Reed inside.

There were strange half-arches formed from the floor of the lake that were collected in a small ring of four in the middle of the room, weird depressions with high curving tops. Onto the walls had been fastened interesting creations of woven plant life and bone—wall art, Harry realised. There was another curtain of waving fronds that must be covering the entry to the rest of the hut.

A hand brushed aside this curtain, a hand that was small but too calloused to be considered delicate, and a Mermaid emerged. She was a tiny thing, compared to Reed, and very slender, but she looked strong for all that. Her hair was short, held back from her face with a comb of sorts made from fish bone. Her face broadened into a smile.

“Welcome. You must be Harry, Reed’s wizard student.”

She spoke in slow, careful tones for Harry’s benefit. Harry followed the custom he’d learned from Reed, spreading his hands in front of him and dipping his head, a horribly difficult proposition when he was also frantically trying to keep himself in an upright position underwater. He was momentarily surprised by the sight of his own hands, webbed as they were, but he straightened up with admirable poise.

“I thank you for your invitation, lady.”

Reed had confided to Harry that calling their women “lady” was likely a custom they’d picked up when they had more regular contact with wizards, but it wouldn’t do to point out to a Merperson that anything in their culture had come from humans. They preferred to think wizards picked up habits from them.

“This is my wife, Sylphia,” Reed said, sounding proud.

“Please, come in and rest,” the small Mermaid said, gesturing at the weird shapes rising from the floor. “I have almost finished preparing some refreshment.”

Reed laughed at Harry's befuddlement, and his wife's laughter joined his to create a night sky of bubbles instead of stars over their heads. He maneuvered himself into a sitting position inside the depression. The weird arch was over his head, and held him down so that he did not float into the ceiling. They were chairs!

He slowly figured out how to sit in one, and did his halting best to respond to Reed's steady, bubbling voice. This was normal, so he didn't feel embarrassed, at least not until Sylphia came back and began speaking in those same lilting, musical tones. Harry spoke with hesitation, wishing once more that there was someone back at school whom he could practice with. When he was with Dumbledore, they had more important things to do.

He was nervous about the "refreshment," thinking that he was going to be consuming a pile of fish gut and lake weed salad. Instead, he was given something that greatly resembled sushi. He even discovered that he had the linguical skills to inquire about the rice-like substance. The best he could figure out from the response was that the Merpeople cultivated it in the muddy bottom of the lake. Reed told him that his folk, here in the lake, had come from the great seafolk, and this was a dish they had been preparing since time immemorial. Sushi was something wizards had gotten from merfolk and then passed along to the rest of humanity.

Harry was positively gleeful about that—that was the sort of things he'd begun his studies with Reed to find out. His mind automatically began tracing a course of studying with the lake folk until he finished at Hogwarts, then moving to the Mediterranean coast where the Merpeople of the sea still flourished to study with them. They would likely speak a different dialect that he would have to adapt himself to, but the number of things he could find out . . .

Apparently, he'd been speaking aloud, because Reed and Sylphia were laughing at him. Which was strange, because he'd been speaking in English, so far as he knew.

"What is the reason for your laughter?" Harry asked. Mermish really needed to develop the word "why," in his opinion.

"You a scholar, as my husband," Sylphia answered in broken English. "You and Reed love study, the same way."

Reed began laughing, the sound flying in bubbles around the room. "As you can see, my wife is not the student we are."

Harry didn't feel right about laughing at Sylphia, but she was laughing herself.

"I do not have dedication such as you or Reed does," she admitted, switching back to Mermish. "But Harry," she said, her face growing serious, "even my husband, with his need to know all the history of our people, does not weary himself as I see you do."

"I don't understand," Harry said automatically. He was getting tired of accusations that he wore himself out too much.

Sylphia, perhaps thinking that he didn't possess the capacity for language to understand her, floated gracefully forward to trace the circles under his eyes with her strong, small hands. "This is not from study, though. I know what worry looks like. My husband has told me of what is happening in the above. The wizards are at war again. Is this your worry?"

Harry pulled his head back. "I'm fine, but I thank you."

She made a noise of disbelief, and gave his cheek a maternal pat. "Reed should have told you, you cannot lie to me. I always know."

He tried to smile at her, and found that he had to revert again to English. He hoped she would understand. "I've been told that I take too much on myself. What can I say? I do it on purpose, so I have no reason to complain."

"This makes sense," Sylphia said frankly, "but is not an excuse to kill yourself for the world."

Harry shrugged, understanding her Mermish well enough to know what she was getting at. "The world needs saving. If not me, then who?"

She had no response, and floated back to her seat. "I like him, Reed."

Reed grunted, busy with eating a piece of his wife's cooking. He'd heard this from Harry before. "I said you would," he muttered. "I've liked him for months. I have the responsibility of ambassador for our people, and I do not invite wizards down here if I do not like them."

"You let those foolish children down here," she said primly. "That bird girl nearly got killed."

"I did that for Dumbledore," Reed said dismissively. "They didn't stay long, and I knew Pesca and Murk would love threatening them. Harry is different."

"I am?" Harry said.

"You are here to learn," Reed shrugged. "We are a culture that appreciates such things. We are entrusted with ancient secrets and knowledge that wizards have forgotten, but you have come to find out. As I told you, when we first began to meet, you have a responsibility now. To my people. You must hold our secrets as close as we do, but you also must find one person you trust, to pass the knowledge along."

Harry had thought, when Reed first said this, that it was sort of a symbolic thing, or a tradition. He could see now that Reed had meant it. And suddenly he realised what his desire to learn meant to Dumbledore. Dumbledore had been entrusted with the knowledge of the Merfolk, and he had to find someone to pass the knowledge along to. Harry had come along just when Dumbledore had probably begun to believe that he would fail to keep that trust.

"Is the origin of sushi a secret?"

Reed didn't laugh, as Harry had thought he would. "It is knowledge of my people, and you must hold it with care. Can you think of problems it would cause if this became common knowledge? Or if people knew that we can sing the fish to us, or that we still know secrets about wizards and other humans from long ago?"

Harry began to see Reed's point. He had a brief image of flocks of people standing on the shore of every major body of water in the world, begging the Merpeople for every secret they had—or terrorizing them in a malicious battle to prove the legitimacy of their claims. Or killing them to cover up information about their ancestors. He shuddered.

"I understand my responsibility," he said humbly.

Reed nodded curtly. "I knew that you would, or I would not have taken you as my student."

Harry thought about that for a moment, and a small smile spread over his face. He liked being this trustworthy. The burden of the things he was learning, of all the things he was trying to learn, was very heavy. But it helped, to know that he had this burden because he'd earned it.

He took a second dose of gillyweed before Reed took him to the meeting place for his tiny village. It was the same place, he said, that the "hostages" had been held during the Triwizard Tournament. The entire community turned out to meet him. They were all intensely curious about whether or not their village scholar was touched to be teaching a teenaged wizard from above the secrets of their people. Harry did his best to reassure them. He was at his most charming, but didn't make the mistake of joking around. They were a serious people and he didn't have a handle on their sense of humour yet.

But he'd get it eventually, because he'd be back. As cold and foreign as it was, he liked it down here. Or maybe he liked it because it was cold and foreign. It brought to him the same feeling of relaxation that he had when he was in his Animagus form, and when he'd lived as a Muggle. He was someone else, then. He got to be nothing more or less than who he wanted to be.

Harry was feeling weary as he made the cold trudge back to the castle. He had dried himself off quickly with his wand, but it was February and being dry didn't mean it wasn't cold out. He picked up his pace, but he wasn't all that eager to get back inside. He'd missed a DL meeting because he'd spent so long under the lake, and he'd

have to face Neville's disappointment. Neville sort of counted on him, as the still-undefeated champion of DL ambushes (which had mostly died out by now, except the attacks on him) to be there to keep morale high. Ron and Ginny would probably pester him about where he'd been, as well, which would be difficult to explain since he didn't ever talk about the Hallows or his Mermish studies.

It was a Saturday night and there weren't many students in the corridors or on the stairs in the castle. He made it up to Gryffindor Tower unmolested and entered it with his mood bolstered by not having to fight for his life on the way up.

"Evening," he said to the room at large, and sauntered over to where his roommates were working on a Transfiguration essay. He felt a prickle on the back of his neck that meant he was being watched, but he ignored it. It was sort of his job to look over everyone's essay before they turned them in, so they were likely waiting for him. "Can I join you lot? I still have to finish my essay."

The tension in the room was creeping over him. He put his hand on his wand, which still rested in the arm sheath. His roommates all looked up at him simultaneously, with expressions that he absolutely couldn't read. He felt queer, like someone had died—oh god someone had died—

"Is someone dead?" he said aloud, his voice sounding stupid.

"We thought you might be, mate," Ron answered, his essay forgotten.

"Me?" Harry said, startled. "Why?"

Seamus, for once, did not poke fun at him or call him Great One. "You've been gone all day, Harry, with not a word of where you were goin' or why."

Harry slowly turned to see nearly every eye in the room firmly fixed on him. "So you thought I was dead?" he asked. This is their first and best guess?

Neville gave him a very sober look. "It's not beyond reason, is it? Considering who you are and what you're involved with."

Harry was stopped in his mental tracks. For a moment, he didn't know how to respond. Then he abruptly sat down, feeling queasy and pale.

"You thought I'd gone to Voldemort?" he said, his voice hushed, hoping to keep this conversation at least nominally private. "And that I'd been killed?"

Dean spoke up when the other three seemed to be too uncomfortable. "We didn't really think so, or we'd have gone to one of the adults—well."

"Well, what?"

"Ron said only a minute before you walked in that if you weren't here by the time he finished the next paragraph, he was going to find your godfather. So we didn't really think you were dead, but . . . well, okay, we were worried."

"If you had gone to Sirius, you wouldn't have been. He knew where I was."

"Where were you?" Ron challenged.

Harry shrugged. "I was talking to a couple of experts about some of the subjects I'm studying."

Ron knew better than to press him for details at this point, but he did give him a look that communicated repressed anger. "Next time you decide to disappear for an entire day, would you mind telling someone?"

Harry experienced another moment of being too stunned to come up with something to say. Why were they so concerned as to his whereabouts? Did they really think he was so foolish that he'd go haring off to take on Voldemort's entire army without even telling anyone about it?

Okay. He might be able to think of a few circumstances in which he'd want it to be a secret, like if he was planning to infiltrate Voldemort's stronghold or something. But he probably wasn't going to do that. And they ought to know he wasn't ready to try. Besides, he wasn't entirely sure he liked how upset they were. He was so tired of being a symbol or whatever he was.

"You guys really need to figure out that if I'm gone, someone else can take care of Voldemort. I don't see myself dying anytime soon, but even if I do, I assume you're planning to keep fighting."

The other boys gave each other very odd looks.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"Of course we'd keep fighting," Ron said. "That's not really the point I was trying to make. We were concerned because you're a friend of ours."

"Oh," Harry said, only just beginning to understand.

"I might even be sort of sad if something were to happen to you," Ron said in a dry tone. "Not that I'd miss you or anything, you great prat. Who would miss someone so completely clueless?"

Harry wished he was dead. This wasn't exactly a comfortable moment for anyone, least of all him. He was a secretive and emotionally distant bastard, wasn't he? He didn't contribute anything to this little group but mental stress and stringent standards of personal discipline. They humoured him, but he couldn't imagine they'd miss it if he wasn't there. The only thing he could conceivably be good for, as a friend, was that he could always be counted on to correct their essays.

"You forgot short-tempered," he joked. "Seriously, I do still need to finish my essay, so I'm going to run upstairs and get it. Will you still be a while down here, or should I head to the library?"

The others looked like they wanted to say they were done, but Ron spoke first.

“I still have quite a way to go. You know me and essays.”

So Harry stood up, with a desperate desire to get away from the table for a moment and get his mind into some semblance of order. His day had been intensely up-and-down, and riddled with moments of self-doubt and feelings of being the only one of his kind in the world. He hadn't been prepared for this.

He almost laughed as he headed for the stairs. Apparently he wasn't the undefeated champion of ambushes, after all.

In fact, his second defeat came only moments later. Hermione was sitting very near the stairs, with Parvati on one side, and a seventh-year named Jonny Burgar from their Ancient Runes class on the other. Her eyes were red and she was in the classic “being-comforted” pose. And it was Burgar. Sitting there patting her hand. So he finally understood why Hermione got so cheesed about seeing him talk to Luna once in a while.

She looked up at him, and suddenly stood up and walked over to him. They were all watching, but Harry's glare took care of that, and every student in the room was immediately very interested in their games and homework. Except Jonny Burgar, who watched him with a worrisome intensity.

But he didn't care about Burgar, he cared about his ex-girlfriend. Her still-wet eyes undid him completely. “Hermione, are you all right?” He reached out to her, unable to help the compulsion to comfort her.

She flinched, but allowed his hands to rest on her shoulders. “No.”

“What's wrong? Can I help?”

She seemed to steel herself, and her red-rimmed eyes ceased to be pathetic and became a sort of weapon. “They were saying something had happened to you.”

"I know," he said, feeling embarrassed all over again.

"I felt so . . ." She trailed off. "Harry, I couldn't bear it if it were true. Even thinking about it has got me so upset that I burst into tears over some ink spilled on my translation. Jonathan is oblivious of course, he thinks it's my time of the month or something, but I'm sure Parvati knows why I'm so upset."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying to say anything. I just said it. I care about you a great deal, and I would be very upset if you were hurt or killed. Please don't let that happen."

"I'll do my best," he said, not without some exasperation. He didn't think this day could get any weirder, for one thing, and for another, why did everyone seem to think he was that anxious to throw himself into the jaws of death? He didn't want to say any of that, though, so he just said what was on his mind. "I miss you, Hermione. You're the best friend I've ever had."

"I miss you, too," she whispered.

"Are you still angry with me?"

"No. I don't think I was to begin with."

Then why in hell did you freak out and proceed to break up with and isolate yourself from me? "I want to be able to talk to you again."

She didn't respond to that. Harry felt that pair of watchful eyes keenly.

"So you and Bugar . . . you're together?"

"I have been on a date with Jonathan and allowed him to hold my hand," she said. "Does that count?"

"With you, it does."

"I suppose we are, then."

"I don't think he likes me."

"I think he knows you hold a much larger place in my heart than he does."

"You look good, Hermione. I don't want to get in his way. But we should partner up again next DL meeting, we were pretty unstoppable last time."

She smiled. "I'd like that."

"Well, I have to go get my essay and finish it up. I have a lot of other studies tonight."

If they were still as close as they'd been, he'd tell her that he was trying to track the location of the Elder Wand. In fact, if they were still that close, she'd have already known. She'd probably have gone to the Lovegood house with him. But here in the common room, with Burgar waiting for her, he couldn't do that.

"So, I'll see you around," he concluded.

"Yes, because we don't see each other around all the time," she retorted.

He chuckled. "Okay, that was lame. But I do have to get to work, and it looks like your boyfriend is getting a bit worried."

Hermione sniffed. "Let him worry. I don't answer to him. But if you have things to do, then go on. But promise me you'll get some sleep, Harry. You look—"

"Tired, and stressed out," he finished for her. "I know. Gee, wonder why?"

She gave him a disapproving look.

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

“Yes, I know,” she murmured, as he went upstairs to retrieve his essay and join his roommates. “I believe in you.” But she was troubled. Because she believed that he’d do anything it took to make himself into what he wanted to be. He’d push himself far beyond his limits to gain the knowledge and ability he craved, and he’d break himself for it. He wanted so much to find a way around this prophecy, yet still stand up to Voldemort, and she believed in him so much that she knew he’d do it. And when he came to the other side, he’d be a used-up shell of a person with nothing left to give and no one in his life to give it to after he pushed them all away to keep them safe.

Jonathan Burgar was polite and complimented her taste in clothing and lavished praise on her skill with runes. He was a perfectly good boyfriend. But if it was between the security of a polite boyfriend, and the heart-poundingly risky venture of saving her best friend from himself . . . She’d given herself time and space to think, lots of it. It was time to reassess that decision.

Chapter Nine

Harry had (just barely) been able to wheedle an advanced copy out of the paper before it ran. It was his only insurance, since he knew perfectly well that no amount of apology or explanation would put things right if he were taken out of context. He'd answered questions for the press before, and even gone through an excruciating formal interview when he'd first revealed his identity. It was different this time. The interviewer was a young rising star at the paper, and she'd been totally receptive to anything Harry had to say. He'd found himself saying much more than he intended, much more openly.

So, he had to make sure he could live with the result. His plan was to sabotage the printing tonight to keep it from getting out, if he was unhappy with it. They'd never agree to change it this late in the game, and they'd purposely given him the advance as late as they possibly could. The owl had arrived while he was working on the most difficult Potion he had ever brewed, and it had to sit there for nearly fifteen minutes until he arrived at a place in the process where he could take a break. He was already annoyed when he sat down and determined not to like what he read.

He settled down on his bed, and unconsciously held his breath for more than half the article.

A Hero in the Making

By Gertrude Garnet

The young man in front of me runs his hands through his hair with an endearing nervous energy, seeming not to realise that the already messy black locks are now sticking out every which way. He looks uncomfortable and restless, even though patrons of Three Broomsticks normally love its cheerful and warm atmosphere.

"Try to relax," I urge him. "I know I'm a reporter, but I don't bite. Promise."

He laughs, and seems to settle. "Sorry. You must be used to it, huh?"

Well, I am learning to be. He is no different from many people I've interviewed, with an anxiety that I will deliberately misquote or misrepresent him. I am the press, after all. But today of all days, I want things to be different. The two of us have come for the same thing. We're here to figure out the truth, even if it takes both of us.

"I can forget I work for the newspaper if you can," I tell him with a smile.

He relaxes even more, and with that heartbreaker of a smile on display, it's easy to understand the rumours of his popularity with the ladies. He has a reputation for being a charming and engaging boy. The more I talk to him, the more I think that it's a totally false conception. He's not a boy at all, despite his youth, and he's far too serious to be charming. With the weight of the world on his shoulders, how could he be anything less than a fully capable and mature wizard?

Well. Enough of my comments and interpretation. I am committed to giving the public exactly what it needs, exactly what this young man wants. From here on, I leave nothing out and add nothing superfluous. I asked the questions, he gave me the answers, and now I can present nothing more or less than the unedited words of Harry James Potter.

GG: You've spoken to the press before, and I have no wish to waste our time together with repetitious questions about your plans to stop Voldemort, or anything of that nature. I'm here to get to know you, as a person. Sound good to you?

HP: Sounds quite frightening, doesn't it? Who wants the Chosen One to be a real person?

GG: You make a good point, Mr. Potter.

HP: Oh, god, don't call me that. Just Harry.

GG: Thank you, Harry. Well, to answer your question: me. I'm very interested in finding out just who our chosen hero is. Let me start by

asking you a really loaded question: are you sorry you returned to Britain?

HP: Whoa, that is loaded. Well, I'm going to choose to interpret that as a question of how badly I miss the other places I've lived. The answer is, not terribly. England is where I was born, and where my family and heritage is. The other places I've been only seemed like home because Sirius—my godfather—was always with me.

GG: You two seem exceptionally close. Would you say that your connection through your parents has brought that about?

HP: No, not really. Of course, that is what brought us together to begin with, but we stayed together because we love each other. Sirius has been raising me since I was eight years old. He gave up his entire life, several times over, just to stay with me. I want to say that I owe him for that, but we don't think of our relationship in terms of who owes what. He filled the need for a father in my life, and he's done an excellent job.

GG: Some would say that going on the run and never letting you stay in one place for too long is bad parenting. What do you say?

HP: Wow, you really aren't going to ask the typical questions, are you? Not that I'm complaining, I'm quite tired of the political crap. Anyway, the answer is, we did what we had to do to stay safe. In that respect, Sirius did a better job than anyone could have asked. Not only that, but I was always very happy to go to a new place, and I sometimes got to pick the spot. I absolutely love travelling to new places and experiencing new cultures and types of people. I love learning new languages and customs and eating things I've never tasted before. Every time we went somewhere new, I learned a new way of thinking and was exposed to different styles of education. So wouldn't you say that Sirius gave me a great deal more than any traditional parent ever has?

GG: I'm not here to make any judgements at all, I'm just here to let you talk. I will say that your passion speaks volumes. If I had any doubts about the love and loyalty in your home, I've lost them. Since we are on the topic of your home, would you be willing to answer

some questions about the rumours that Remus Lupin has distanced himself from you and your cause?

HP: No, I wouldn't.

GG: Okay. Um, let's move on.

HP: Wait, I do want to say one thing about that. You promise this will be printed exactly the way I say it? Never mind, I know you have editors and all that rot. I'll just say it anyway. Whatever anyone might hear about Remus Lupin, I want them to remember that he is one of the best men I know and totally deserving of the support of the magical community. I have heard the rumours that we kicked him out or that he became uncomfortable living with us because he has lycanthropy, and I want it to be known that it isn't true. I will always consider him a member of my family, and I am insulted that anyone thinks Sirius and I are such bigots.

GG: Okay, thank you for clearing that up, Harry. I take it that you feel strongly about werewolf rights?

HP: Like I was hiding my opinions? I've been trying to get involved in some new legislation and I've been as loud as possible in my support of the changes that would allow werewolves to find work and homes among the rest of the wizarding population. There's not a lot that I would say Muggles do better than wizards, but the way they've improved the treatment of people with illnesses is one of them. I'm not trying to say anything nasty about wizards. I'm simply saying that we are very slow to adapt to change, and I'd like to see us speed up this process. Um, I'm sorry. I really went off on you, didn't I? I apologise.

GG: Don't be sorry, Harry. We're here to have an open dialogue, and I'm glad to see you opening up about your personal feelings.

HP: Oh. Well, what's next?

GG: I have a huge list of questions I could ask you, but . . .

HP: Did you just throw your notes away?

GG: I did. I'd much rather just let you talk. You seem to have a lot to say.

HP: I guess I do. It's funny, because I didn't think I had that much I wanted to say today. I'm not used to reporters just listening to me, or asking me questions about this kind of stuff.

GG: I hope it's a welcome change.

HP: Yeah, this is great. Normally, it's all, do you think you can defeat You-Know-Who? [Editor's comment: Despite Ms. Garnet's adamant insistence that no editing be done to Mr. Potter's words, we felt it was in the best interests of our readers not to use the name Mr. Potter used for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Ms. Garnet has reviewed this article and agrees that this has been our sole editorial change to the original text, though she wishes it to be made clear that she protests the change, as it speaks toward Mr. Potter's character that he uses this name.] Is your alliance to Dumbledore part of your political aspirations? Do you support such and such a candidate to replace Fudge? Do you plan to lead wizards in battle? There's so much that I obviously can't talk about if I want it to succeed, and I'm tired of begging off questions like that. Of course, now I'm worried you're going to start asking me about girlfriends or something.

GG: Well, since you bring it up, Harry, why don't you tell me about that. Any special women in your life?

HP: I know a lot of special women. No, really, I don't have a girlfriend right now. As I'm sure you can appreciate, I've had other things on my mind. Honestly, I don't know if anyone could put up with me for very long. I barely find the time to sleep, and my friends tell me I'm a very boring conversationalist. All I ever talk about is what I'm studying.

GG: You're quite a serious student, by all accounts.

HP: I am, in a lot of ways. It's not really about school, exactly. I'm not interested in how many NEWTS I get or what grade I get on a term exam. My real concern is that I learn the most I possibly can from every book I read and every professor I study under. From every

person I meet, really. I'm a student of everything. Does that make sense? Even when I'm just trying to relax, I'm still learning. It's always been really important to me to take something new away from every thing and every person I encounter.

GG: Do you think that's just the way you are, or would you say there is a deeper reason for it?

HP: When I was younger, I thought I was going to be the greatest wizard of all time. I thought I was going to learn so much so quickly that I could laugh while I defeated enemies with one arm tied behind my back. Obviously, that wasn't very realistic, and I figured that out only too quickly. But even back then, I loved to learn. It's become so much a part of me that I couldn't stop even if I wanted to. I don't think I'll ever be considered the greatest wizard of all time, but if something I've learned helps someone or keeps something bad from happening, I'll know that I wasn't just wasting my time. I think I would be horrified if I got to the end of my life, and all the things I'd learned hadn't done any good. I want to make the world better. Really, what are any of us here for, if not that?

GG: That's a beautiful idea, Harry. But it sounds exhausting. I'll admit, I was never the top student in my class, but even a really bright student would have a hard time keeping up with you. How do you manage to achieve such results in the classroom while simultaneously shining on the Quidditch pitch?

HP: Because I love Quidditch! Probably as much as I love learning. I'm not much of a poet, and I think I'd have to be one to be able to describe what it's like. Playing, I mean, or even flying. The wind rushing past you, the thrill of adrenaline of the game while you revel in doing something you're good at, and that deeper knowledge that you're part of a team that is all experiencing the excitement with you . . . Um.

GG: Sounds like you're more of a poet than you thought. Do you think participating in Quidditch eases some of the stress in the rest of your life?

HP: Not with Ron Weasley as my team captain! Just joking, Ron is great. But Quidditch is hard work just as much as it's fun. Now I'm just rambling. I think it does relieve a lot of stress, yeah. Doing something purely physical and just letting go for a while is nice.

GG: One look at you and I can tell you're quite used to doing physical things. Does Ron ask everyone on the team to stay in such great shape?

HP: Um, no. Well, we all stay in decent shape, you can't do the things we do on brooms if you're not, but I tend to go a little overboard. Why not, right? Everybody needs a hobby.

GG: I've heard you're part of a group of students who meets regularly to practice dueling techniques. Do you think your physical strength is a factor in your achievements with that group?

HP: Definitely. Helps to be able to dodge, just in case. But that's only part of the story. There are so many different factors in a magical fight. I'm far from being the only one who can hold their own in the, um, club. Simple commitment and practice goes a long way, which is what Neville would tell you. He's our leader.

GG: Would that be Neville Longbottom?

HP: Yeah.

GG: Was this dueling club formed prior to your attendance at Hogwarts?

HP: Um, no. Actually, I started it. But I got too busy, and I wanted Neville to take over. He has a ton of knowledge and more dedication than the rest of us put together. He's a great guy.

GG: So, no hard feelings between the two of you, then?

HP: Merlin, you would bring that up. No, Neville and I are friends. Why wouldn't we be? We're both on the same side, for the same reasons. Like I said, Neville was who I wanted to keep our club going after I couldn't do it anymore. He's pretty amazing.

GG: I see I've touched a sore spot for you, Harry. Care to elaborate?

HP: I just don't see the point in the public trying to decide between me and Neville. I don't think it makes a difference. Both of us are sixteen years old and too inexperienced to lead this fight. We're just two among many who think that what's going on in our world is wrong and needs to be stopped. We are part of something much greater than ourselves, something I hope would go on without either of us if we weren't here.

GG: Do you really feel that it's wrong to have a symbol of hope, even with the world continually growing darker?

HP: No, no, of course not. Hope and faith are really the only reasons to keep going. But put your hope in something meaningful, not in me. I'm only one person. We need to have faith, collectively, wizards I mean, that we are better than this. Faith that together we're going to make a better world. I can't do that for all of us. If people want to look up to me, that's fine, but . . . I would only want that if I can be a good example of what a fighter in this war looks like, not as some kind of hero who's going to save them. Because even if I wanted to, I can't do that. We're all going to save each other. That's what I believe. I'll do my part. I'm doing it right now. But you have a part, as well.

GG: I really appreciate you sharing that, Harry. That's an amazing thought, that we could all save each other. I really can't wait to share this with my readers.

HP: Yeah. I almost forgot that's what we were doing. I didn't feel like I was talking to a reporter at all. Are you sure you're from the paper?

GG: Yes, I really am. Believe it or not, Harry, I think the world ought to hear what you have to say. Not only that, but exactly as you said it. If we're going to put you up on a pedestal, I think we owe it to you.

HP: I didn't think of it that way. You're a really good listener, you know? I could get used to this. Hey, you get the exclusive interview when I lead England to win the Quidditch World Cup, okay?

GG: Oh, I'm going to remember that. I know how valuable your time is, and I can't thank you enough for allowing me this interview.

HP: Honestly, Ms. Garnet, it was no trouble at all. This was really not what I was expecting.

GG: So you learned something new. I guess you've met your real goal, then.

HP: She's funny, too. I still find it hard to believe that you're going to print this. People are actually going to know what I believe. I was beginning to think they never would.

GG: Have a little faith, Harry.

I mean it as a parting joke, but the extraordinary green eyes begin to fill with tears. I can see that the things he's been discussing with such conviction and passion are beginning to overwhelm him. We exchange a few more words, and I know that he is trying very hard to hold his emotions together. He's been let down too many times, and I can hardly express how amazing it feels to be the one with the opportunity to correct that.

He tries to thank me, but I don't need any thanks. The privilege was all mine.

Besides, he promised me an exclusive interview when he becomes a Quidditch star. Don't think I won't hold you to it, Harry Potter.

Harry clutched the copy in his hands so tightly that the pages began to wrinkle. He couldn't believe it. It was actually going to print, and they weren't going to edit out anything they didn't like. He'd liked Ms. Garnet from the moment she'd shaken his hand, simply because she didn't fawn over him. He only grew to like her more the further they got into the interview. It had never started to feel like an interview, more like a conversation between friends.

She hadn't asked him about Voldemort, or Dumbledore, or if thoughts of his dead parents were guiding him. Not one stupid question. She'd just let him talk. It was unbelievable. And as a result, this was the first time since he and Sirius had come out in public that he wasn't dreading opening up the morning paper.

He had to get Ms. Garnet something really nice. Maybe a potted plant.

Speaking of plants . . . he needed sleep, but he had to get back to brewing. This was too important to be anything less than perfect.

Breakfast. The Great Hall. The release of the morning paper.

It was only two or three minutes before the sleepy mumbles erupted into a steady buzz of conversation. Harry looked up at the staff table and he and Sirius beamed at each other with pride. Dumbledore seemed too careworn and distracted to share in their happiness, and Professor Snape was sneering at the paper with a disdain that was half-show and half-sincere.

Harry wanted to look down the table to where Hermione sat, but Jonny was there with his head practically laid on her shoulder, reading the article with her, so Harry turned away. Ron, sitting beside him, became very quiet, but Ginny was there to pound his shoulders and tell him what a great job he'd done.

"I didn't actually do anything," he answered.

She plopped down next to him and stole a piece of toast off his plate. "You're doing it right now," she said, crunching into it and speaking without concern for the fact that her mouth was full. "All the stuff that you were talking about in that interview."

"So, if I'm hearing you right, you're congratulating me for having opinions?"

Ginny scowled at him. "Get over yourself, Great One, I can tell how pleased you are."

"How can I be pleased? You've stolen my toast!"

"Your coffee, too," she smirked, picking up the cup and taking a leisurely sip.

"Hey, that's my coffee! And you called me Seamus' stupid name."

"Is she looking over here yet?" Ginny asked in a very quiet voice.

"What? Who?"

"Who?" Ginny mocked. "Hermione, of course. No, don't look right at her like that. You can't be obvious about it when you're trying to make someone jealous."

"I didn't know I was," he said in bewilderment.

She pushed his coffee into his hands. "You're hopeless, Harry, but it's all right, I'm on your side. You two were so perfect together, and Jonny Bugar's got his head up his own arse." She stood up again. "Don't worry, she was looking. But I meant it, Harry, congratulations. I think the interview is brilliant."

She sauntered away, and Harry turned to Ron to see that he looked just as confused as Harry felt.

"Girls, mate," Ron said with a helpless shrug. "But she's right, Hermione was looking. And the interview is . . . really good."

"It is, isn't it?" Harry said happily, catching the nods of encouragement coming from all around him.

He risked a glance at the Slytherin table, to see if the entire table was matching their expression to Snape. He saw the four prefects all gathered around, making disgusted faces in Harry's direction and speaking what were obviously detrimental remarks. But in the midst of it, Draco stood up, slowly laid his copy of the paper down on the table (seeming not to care that it landed in his breakfast) and left the room without a word to anyone. Served the bastard right if it upset him, didn't it? He'd made his choices.

When Harry and Ron and Dean left the table, Luna was also leaving hers. She "accidentally" crossed paths with him just outside the door. Trading smirks, the other two boys left Harry with her.

“Daddy wanted me to tell you how much he enjoyed your last conversation,” Luna said, seeming just as oblivious as ever. Harry knew for a fact she’d noticed what passed between his roommates, and she might even have mysteriously divined what it was he’d been talking to her father about. “He says he has some more information, if you can find the time to come over. He’d also like to get a quote from you on the conspiracy among Quidditch League coaches to overthrow the Muggle Prime Minister.”

Harry worked very hard to keep a straight face. “I’d like to meet with him again soon, although I don’t know enough about the Quidditch conspiracy to offer a reliable quote. Thanks, Luna.”

“You’re quite welcome, Harry.”

“Say, Luna? Do you have a minute so I can ask you something?”

“Well, Harry, I do have a minute, but that seems like quite a long question.”

“I meant did you have time to answer once I ask.”

“You are certain that the answer will only take a minute?”

“Well, no. I was just hoping that you did have time to answer.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps you should ask the question, then I can decide if I have the time.”

Harry was simultaneously exasperated and delighted. It was utterly impossible to be bored around this girl—or even slightly comfortable, either. It made for one wild shag, but he couldn’t picture himself doing it again. He would really need to find a different way to word that, if he ever got the chance to tell Hermione.

“Okay. The question is, do you know of any powerful object associated with Ravenclaw House? I’ve heard it said that Helga Hufflepuff had a special cup, and I wondered if Rowena had something like that.”

Luna frowned in thought. "I believe I have time to answer. I believe there is an object like that. It is lost now, but she had a diadem that granted wisdom to the one who wore it. My father actually knows quite a bit about it. He's been talking about trying to remake it."

"So the original version has been destroyed?"

"No, not destroyed. Just lost."

"When was it lost?"

"Oh, quite a long time ago, actually."

"I see. Thank you, Luna. That's very helpful."

"I'm glad, Harry. Will you be at the DL meeting on Wednesday?"

"I think I will. See you then. Have a nice day, Luna."

Harry walked away with a grin. He couldn't wait to ask Dumbledore if he knew anything about the diadem. They'd been trying and trying to think of an object that Voldemort might have used for a Horcrux, and Dumbledore had said he would ask Professor Flitwick the same question Harry had just asked Luna. They were getting close to identifying all the objects Voldemort had used. Then it would just be a matter of tracking them down. The diary, of course, was already destroyed, as was the ring (at what price?). Harry was starting to feel like they were actually getting somewhere.

He met Harry a full mile from the place they lived. No one could Apparate directly into their community without getting hurt, and the perimeter was so carefully guarded that for an unknown wizard to approach would probably also lead to violence. He would escort Harry in to ensure his safety.

Harry arrived in exactly the place they were supposed to meet, recognizing immediately the scrape in the bark of the large tree that had been left as a marker. He shuffled his feet and wondered if he oughtn't brave the perimeter guard. The volatile potion couldn't really wait.

Just as he decided to set out, footsteps sounded and he sighed with impatience. He waited.

Remus strode into the small clearing only moments later. Harry noted that he looked a little more ragged than usual, but he was so tired of hearing about his own decline in appearance that he decided not to bring it up.

“Where’s Sirius?”

“At school.”

“He didn’t even wait around to say hello?”

“He didn’t come, he had to give someone a detention.”

Remus stopped and glared at Harry. “You are not old enough to Apparate.”

Harry shrugged. “And when exactly do you suppose I’m going to get the letter from the Ministry of Magic telling me so? Fudge is too desperate for my favour to start giving me grief.”

Remus continued to glare.

“What? If they insist on giving me special treatment, I’m going to take advantage of it. I’m perfectly capable of Apparation, and it just might save my life at some point.”

Remus groused but couldn’t really argue that point. He just liked to play the hard case because he thought Sirius treated Harry too much like an adult.

“It’s good to see you,” Harry ventured.

Remus finally broke and smiled at him. “You, too, Harry. Come on. Come and meet everyone.”

Harry followed Remus, trying to remain cautious, but too hopeful to really feel it. He was careful to keep the cauldron level as he levitated it along with them. The little plume of smoke that rose from it trailed out behind them like a banner.

“They do know I’m coming, right?”

Remus’ eyes were darting everywhere at once, but he nodded in answer. “I didn’t tell them who you are, but they know someone is coming.”

“Why didn’t you tell them?”

“They don’t trust anyone, especially not anyone who gets his photo in the paper. I will say that they’re speaking more kindly about you since the interview came out yesterday. But they’ve a long way to go. You distance yourself from the establishment that let them down, but that doesn’t mean they’re sold on you yet.”

“That’s fair.” But Harry said it with a sinking heart. He was putting in a lot of effort on behalf of werewolves. He was going to watch one of his allies on the Wizengamot present a proposal next week, and possibly even be invited to speak since he’d helped draft the proposal. “What about Tonks?”

“I haven’t even been able to bring it up since that first time. They absolutely won’t believe it’s possible for me to have a girlfriend who is a normal witch. There are ten men, including me, and only six women, yet they are still reserving Franka for me. At least I haven’t found her naked in my bed yet, which is what she was threatening to do.”

“So, still not grasping the concept of integration with wizards?”

“No, not really. But the new people came to me, not Greyback, so it’s a start. You have to understand that we are looking at hundreds of years of completely legal oppression, compared to a few months of open dialogue spearheaded by a sixteen-year-old and a witch with purple hair.”

“And Dumbledore. And Madam Bones.”

“Bones?”

“You know, woman I’ve been working with on all this new legislation? Only person I really like in the Ministry that’s not an Auror?”

“She does seem like a good sort. But I can say that, because I’ve met enough kind wizards to know the difference. The rest of them really haven’t. They do have a lot of respect for Dumbledore, for the most part. But what’s he been able to do? He couldn’t protect even me, and I’ve been connected to him most of my life.”

Harry had almost completely stopped walking by now. It was impossible that Remus had missed it, but he continued to move, his eyes roaming the trees and obviously listening to things Harry wasn’t. Not that Harry wasn’t keeping a sharp eye out, himself. It was just a little weird to watch Remus do it.

“There’s not really any point to me being here, is there? What I’m doing is basically worthless to them.”

Remus finally stopped, turned to Harry, and stilled himself to meet his eyes. “Don’t think like that. It might not seem like much, compared to what we’re up against, but it’s an act of good faith. You are doing something tangible to show them how much you’re willing to involve yourself, and they’re going to respect you for it. Up till now, it’s only been words. Now you’re here.”

“Assuming my name doesn’t get me turned away at the gate,” Harry muttered, concentrating on keeping the cauldron of smoking potion steady.

And then they were at the proverbial gate. There actually was a fence around their community, made of logs set on end in the earth and shaved into points at the top, and there was indeed a gate in the middle, which was currently being guarded by two lean, sharp-looking men.

“I’m awfully glad to have those two. Shocked I didn’t lose them to Greyback, honestly, but they’ve been invaluable keeping him out.”

Harry noted the fresh look of the dirt around the fence and figured it was a recent addition because of the threat of Greyback's small band.

"Remus, you wait right there," the taller of the two guards called out. "We said we'd meet him, not choke down his amateur potions experiments."

"Don't be such a crotchety bastard, Neil," came the rejoinder. "I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"You don't mean this kid is where you've been getting the potion from?"

"That's exactly what I mean, Neil, so cram it."

Harry wasn't sure what to make of the exchange until Remus was standing in front of Neil and Neil broke out in a huge grin and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Glad you didn't get ambushed out there, boss."

The other guy was frowning. "Lupin."

"What is it, Yorick?"

"Is the kid who I think he is?"

Harry stepped forward and stuck out his free hand. "Probably. Pleased to meet you."

The man looked at his outstretched hand and then to Remus.

Remus just sighed. "He's already here, Yorick. Just let him in."

Neil stepped aside, pushing the gate open, which earned him quite the dirty look from Yorick, but Remus ushered Harry through without the slightest pause.

"Thank you, gentleman," he said with authority, then they were inside.

Harry looked around. It was a really nice place, truth be told. It looked homey, and comfortable, even if it was a little isolated and small. A half-circle of wooden cabins all faced the gate, very close at hand, and the entire enclosed area between the cabins and the fence was devoted to a huge garden plot. Harry could see several members of Remus' community at work back there, but Remus first led Harry to the furthest cabin on the right.

"This one is mine. Not just mine, of course, we all are sharing with at least one person. I share with Simon, the only child we have here."

Harry followed Remus and finally let his cauldron settle with a little thunk on the wooden plank floor just inside. The entire cabin consisted of a tiny living/dining/kitchen area, a bedroom, and a closet of a bathroom. A blond boy that was just barely into his teens, if even that, was sprawled in one of the two chairs in the room, a book open in his lap.

"Hey, Simon. That guy I told you about is here."

"Harry Potter," Harry said, putting out his hand but not expecting much after Yorick. "Nice to meet you."

Simon gave him a sullen look. "Yeah." He went back to his book.

Remus gave him a quick peek at the bedroom, which was as tidy and Spartan as Harry expected, then led him back out to the front room.

"That's it, I'm afraid. We're very simple here."

Harry smiled. "Didn't you start out pretty much sleeping on the ground?"

Remus smiled back. "I guess we have come a long way."

"Would you two shut up?" Simon snapped. "I'm trying to study."

Harry raised an eyebrow at the rude boy, but only got a look of barely suppressed rage in return. He shrugged and preceded Remus outside.

"Sorry about Simon. Actually, I'm sort of glad that he's following the lesson plan I made for him, but sorry about the attitude. He's had a rough couple of years and he hasn't really caught up with it yet."

"Since he's living with you, I'm assuming his parents don't want him around?"

Remus shook his head. "Worse than that. I only just got the full story out of him a few weeks ago, and it's made it a lot easier to have patience with him. For one thing, he was raised almost completely Muggle. I guess his father was a pureblood, but his mother was a Muggle and she wanted to stay near her family and friends, so his father decided to live as a Muggle with her, and Simon was raised that way. He's a wizard, and he was supposed to go to Hogwarts. Three days before his first term, his mother died in an accident, and it was decided that he would stay home with his father that year and begin school the next year. But that following summer, he was bitten and his father was killed trying to protect him. He didn't have anywhere to go, so he went to the man who'd bitten him."

"Greyback," Harry guessed.

"Of course. This was last summer, by the way. He hasn't been a werewolf even a full year yet."

"So he's, what, twelve?"

"Yes. Thirteen in about a month, I think. He's actually a good kid, but he misses his family terribly and he's very lost."

"At least he's got you," Harry said.

"I pride myself that I am somewhat better than Fenrir Greyback, but I am not about to claim I can do anything for Simon. Except give him a place to sleep, of course. No one else wanted to share a cabin with

him. I was only too happy to do so, since it meant only one housemate instead of two.”

“I’m guessing the other option was that bird Franka.”

“I guessed the same thing. Hence, Simon. I shouldn’t say that, the two of us get along well most of the time. I’m almost starting to think I make a difference.”

Harry looked around. Four men and four women were tending and collecting from the garden, which seemed to range from vegetables to herbs to potions supplies. The cabins were neatly arranged and tidily constructed. Simon was in there studying a book the third-years at Hogwarts were reading.

“Three of the men and two of the women currently have jobs, which is helping support us. Can’t live on carrots, obviously. Everyone tends to fear the day those jobs will end, but I’ve got them channeling that fear into all those anonymous letters to the editor that have been appearing recently. Seems to have sparked sympathy.”

Making a difference, indeed. Harry knew from listening to Professor Snape that Greyback’s group spent a lot of their time living like animals and hurting people for favours from Voldemort.

Harry took a further look at the little compound, and found himself troubled. There were deep scratches marring almost every bit of fence—on the inside. The tidy little cabins had strong, sturdy doors with heavy latches, and even still he could see where doors that had been beaten off the frame had been repaired. He should have come sooner. They needed this badly.

“Remus, that potion isn’t exactly shelf-stable. You need to get them over here so they can meet me and we can get on with it.”

Remus nodded and called everyone over, even telling Neil and Yorick to take minutes off. The two men dropped a heavy bar over the gate before they joined the others in the little cup formed by the fronts of the ring of cabins.

“Everyone, I’d like you to meet my friend Harry,” Remus said when everyone was accounted for—even Simon, who stood with his arms crossed leaning against the doorjamb of his cabin. “As I was telling you before, he has brewed Wolfsbane potion for the entire community, and he’s here to deliver the first treatment to us.”

Harry indicated the cauldron that he’d brought outside, hoping he looked like a pleasant character. He’d even tucked his shirt in today.

No one looked exactly happy, but only one woman spoke up. She was a leggy woman with long hair and enough maturity in her face to indicate at least mid-thirties. She had to be Franka. Harry had no doubt.

“You are Harry Potter, then. What are you hoping to prove by this?”

Harry bowed a little in her direction. “Nothing. I did this because I’ve been talking to Remus and I was upset by the situation you are in. He said only two of you have had access to the potion before?”

Neil was nodding enthusiastically, so that was one. The other was a woman of distinctly Italian appearance, who looked sad.

“As I’ve come to find out,” he said with a little chuckle, “this treatment is a pain in the neck to make. I can see why they charge so much for it. But it’s ridiculous to me that the very people it’s intended for can’t afford it or don’t know where to find it. I mean, if I was brilliant enough to invent something like this, I’d be passing out free samples on the street corners. I’m not, but I’m good enough at Potions work to make the stuff, and I do like a challenge. What else would I do with it but give it to the people who can use it?”

“You expect us to believe that you brewed this up for fun and then just felt bad about throwing it away?” Yorick asked in disbelief.

Harry shrugged, looking at Remus. Remus shrugged back.

“Yes, Harry, it is that weird. Sorry, folks, I should have mentioned that my friend Harry is just not very normal. He thinks things like Potions experiments are fun. He also spends a lot of time at the Ministry

trying to get help for us. It's like I've been telling you all along: not all wizards are prejudiced. What you've got in front of you is one of the least prejudiced people I know."

Simon made a scoffing noise from back at the cabin.

Harry bristled at that. "You know, I didn't come here acting all self-righteous about being enlightened or anything. I came here because I actually care. If you don't want it, then don't take it. But don't you dare go on saying people just ignore your plight and do nothing to help you. If you won't take friendship from me because I'm just a wizard, then you deserve what your pride gets you."

He started to leave, and took the cauldron with him. Yorick tried to get in his face, but Remus made a weird snarling noise and the other man stepped back.

"Wait," the woman who looked Italian said in distress. "Please. At least leave some for Simon. He's only a boy, it's so hard for him."

"Oh, please, Addison," Simon moaned. "Don't try to do that mothering thing again." He gave Harry a defiant look to prove that he absolutely didn't need anything from Harry. But knowing his story gave Harry the ability to see the misery and loss behind the gesture. In fact, it wasn't hard to see it from Yorick or from anyone else in the group, either.

He stopped, letting the cauldron come to rest again. "But if you do want it, you should know that I don't want anything from you in return. I'm giving it to you because I care. That's all. If you don't want me here, I won't come back. You can send someone to pick up the next treatment."

"Why are you really doing this, Harry Potter?" murmured the woman with smoky eyes, the one he was certain was Franka.

Remus let out a sigh of exasperation. "Not everyone has hidden motives, Franka. Listen, I'm going to take Harry back, and when I return, we're going to take this. All of us."

Yorick sneered at him, and Simon declared that no one could make him do anything.

Remus growled low in his throat. "Have I led you wrong yet? Have you allowed me to take that place in your lives, or haven't you?"

No one answered.

"I do not give commands often. This is one of the few I will give you. Everyone will do this once. You can make your own decision after that."

And with that, he firmly led Harry outside the fence. He gave Harry a tired smile on the other side. "For some reason, speaking strongly and walking away seems to work. They don't get the chance to argue. Anyway, I'm glad you came. Thankful. Very thankful. I know that once they try this, they're going to see that it's better. This will make more progress with them than I've been able to all this time. They'll finally see that being a werewolf doesn't have to mean that you're not human."

Harry impulsively reached out and hugged Remus, who jerked back in surprise.

"Seems like you're forgetting a few things, yourself," Harry said. "Don't forget that you've got a family back in the real world."

Remus nodded slowly. "Come on, I'm taking you home."

"I got here without help, you know."

"They don't need to know that. Besides, I haven't seen Sirius in close to a month, and you're right about the family thing."

Remus only stayed for about ten minutes, but Sirius whistled Weird Sisters tunes for the rest of the day. He commented once that he wished Tonks would have known Remus was coming, but Harry kind of thought that only having ten minutes might be more heartbreaking than not seeing him at all.

Two nights after the full moon, Remus brought Dora to the community. After their experience as werewolves with a rational mind, his people suddenly seemed to relax. Remus felt that the abrupt shift in attitude was because they felt less ashamed of themselves and what they were. Whatever it was, Neil expressed an interest in meeting the girl that gave Remus the ability to hold Franka at arm's length. The rest of the community, especially Addison, seemed to agree. Addison was a mother to them all, and she was anxious to see Remus paired off with someone.

Dora pursed her lips at the tall fence, the same way she had when she saw the awful abrasions on Remus' face. Greyback's wolves had attacked but hadn't been able to get past the fence. Unfortunately, Neil and Yorick and Jeremy had thought it was a good idea to go out and chase them off, thinking that with their calmer minds, they'd have the advantage. Remus had been obliged to go out and help, and Jeremy was still recovering from his injuries.

They all met in front of the cabins again. Dora shook hands with each of them in turn, making a point to meet their eyes and repeat their names. Remus' arm never lost its grip on her waist. He hadn't seen her in so long, and she looked so good that it was driving him crazy. It was all he could do to restrain himself as far as putting an arm around her waist instead of shoving her into his cabin and . . . well . . . he really hoped he wasn't blushing as badly as he thought he was.

Simon hadn't come out to meet her. Remus wasn't about to let that stand, so after she'd made small talk with Addison and Neil for a few minutes (coolly ignoring Franka's jealous glares) Remus took her to his cabin.

"It's not much," he cautioned her.

"It's cute," she replied, brushing her hand over his arm and making him nearly howl with longing.

"Dora, I know I told you about Simon, but you should know. He's not doing well. I don't know why, but he hasn't spoken to anyone, not even me, since the full moon."

"I can handle teenagers with attitude," she replied. "I have years of experience."

"Of being the problem," he snorted.

Inside, Simon was lounging in a chair staring at the ceiling, not even pretending to have been absorbed in studying. He looked up when they came in. Remus could tell that he'd meant to give Dora a disgusted look and return to ignoring her, but he didn't. He just looked. Remus had to admit she was not the most normal of witches. She said she'd been undercover today, and she hadn't bothered to change out of her Muggle clothes with highly unnecessary zippers, and her hair was black with a thick orange stripe. He was certain she'd meant to shock his community into seeing her for who she was right away. But all he could think about was how closely the shirt fit her, even if it was hidden under a jacket, and how frustratingly long it would take to get her out of those thick boots.

And how brave she was. To come here, and just be herself. She was one of the most courageous people he knew, being the first Auror to declare her belief that Voldemort had returned, and having that complete inability to hide what she was thinking because she didn't care if anyone judged her for it. And frighteningly smart, when she wanted to be. Merlin, how he'd missed her.

"Simon, this is Dora. She's my . . ." He really didn't know how to describe her. Girlfriend was such a bland word, but they had never spoken any other commitment.

"His," Dora shrugged. "That works for me. But don't call me Dora, only he calls me Dora. My friends call me Tonks."

Simon glared at her.

Then she giggled. "Has anyone ever told you that you look like Cloud?"

Instantly, Simon lit up with a sort of stunned joy. "Like Cloud? You really think so?"

After two days, that was what he had to say?

“You think he looks like a cloud?” Remus asked in confusion.

Simon and Dora both rolled their eyes toward him. “It’s a character from a video game, darling,” she answered. “You wouldn’t understand. Cloud has got that spiky blond hair that hasn’t been combed in months and he wears pants that are way too big for him, just like Simon does.”

Simon reverted back to glaring at her, but Dora winked at him, and he ended up smiling.

Moments later, Dora and Simon were chatting like old friends and Remus just sat and watched them. He knew she was amazing, but sometimes she’d come out with something new and dazzle him yet again. Moody, unresponsive Simon was grinning and gesturing and looking like she was his long-lost best friend. Remus should have realised what was wrong. Raised as a Muggle, he was missing more than simply his parents, he was missing an entire lifestyle. And being able to keep his mind through his transformation two nights ago had probably just made him feel even more strongly that this life wasn’t something he wanted or was suited for. Feeling safe as a werewolf, he’d probably started thinking it wouldn’t be so hard to go back to his old life . . . except that there was no longer anything to go back to.

But maybe, Dora could give him a little bit back. She had started out as an Auror doing undercover work catching Muggle baiters, and she knew a lot of things about what Muggle teenagers were interested in. Maybe Simon rejected Addison because she tried too hard to replace his mother, but he could connect to Dora because she was an addition rather than a replacement.

Everyone was amazed by the way Simon responded to her. Neil declared that he was in love and was going to steal her away from Remus. Franka began to place herself next to Yorick all the time, and Yorick turned out to be Dora’s biggest fan. Well, after Jeremy, because Dora had manipulated some medical supplies from work and healed him.

They didn't mind if Dora stayed the night, after that. Simon would go sleep in Jeremy and Addison's cabin, and no one complained so long as she took her turn patrolling the fence. Remus certainly didn't.

Harry lay down to sleep in the very wee hours of the morning. He would get about three hours of sleep before classes tomorrow, but he hardly cared. He was getting closer. He added Xeno Lovegood to the list of people to whom he owed a potted plant. The man was completely cracked, true, but he knew so much about the Hallows. After their last conversation, they both agreed that Grindelwald had actually used the Elder Wand at some point during his reign of terror.

Which meant something that Harry was almost afraid to know. But he couldn't shake it. What it meant was that Dumbledore knew of it. It had been seen in his lifetime. He had known the man who held was entirely possible that he knew where the thing was. Harry, laying quietly in bed, had a hard time catching his breath at the thought. He didn't know how to bring it up. How could he ask Dumbledore such a question?

The problem was, there was very little time to waste. Dumbledore didn't look good. He looked old. Harry was beginning to think it wasn't going to be long now before it became obvious to everyone else that the headmaster was failing. He wondered if Neville knew. Neville had to know, had to see it. But what had Dumbledore told him?

Harry rolled over and punched his pillow, frustrated. At this rate, he wouldn't get any sleep at all before his classes. He'd gotten pretty good at stilling the million things that clamored for attention in his mind, during the moments he was able to snatch a bit of sleep. But tonight, thoughts of death and of reaching his goal were spinning by him so that he almost reached up to touch them. His heart was beating too fast and his eyes were darting around the room looking for a distraction.

He gave up and did something he didn't want to do. He didn't want to do it because he was afraid it would become a habit only too quickly. He took a sleeping potion. It was a bad idea for many reasons, not least of which was because he had Potions first thing in the morning and he would really hate explaining that he was absent because he'd

overslept. But he took it anyway. Because there was a reason people kept saying he looked exhausted and anxious. He was exhausted and anxious. He wasn't about to waste three hours more on it.

Which was why, when his mind was invaded, Harry couldn't wake up.

"You think I have forgotten you, Harry?"

The silken voice makes him stir. He knows, somehow, that this is a dream and that he should not allow this, but he cannot take control of his mind and rouse it. A figure appears in the darkness, as if walking down a tunnel.

"No, I didn't think so."

"I have been busy, you see. There are so many people who resist me, and I simply haven't had time for you yet. But never think I will not get to you. You are not safe, Harry. In your arrogance, you have begun to assume you are."

"No, I haven't."

"Do not lie to me, boy. I can see into your mind, and I see your arrogance, your belief that I cannot touch you."

He thinks about Kimberly Kearney, the fierce little warrior who always looked at him to see if she was doing it right, except the only look he remembered was the one she'd worn when she found out her father was dead. He doesn't count his personal safety as an assurance that he was untouchable, not at all. But he didn't tell Voldemort that. Voldemort wouldn't understand it, anyway.

"I can take you anytime you like, Voldemort," he says.

He throws up his mental blocks in a panic, using so much force and speed that it is obvious what he is doing. But behind those barriers, his mind is racing. He can't wake up like he wants to. He didn't want to get sucked into a conversation with Voldemort, he left his defenses open so that he could get into Voldemort's head! But he can't escape, and so he has to do something to protect himself, to protect

Dumbledore, to protect their mission. It is easy, really. Voldemort still thinks he was a stupid, belligerent child. He can play that role.

“Take me?” Voldemort chuckles. “I hope you do not mean that you can best me. That would be foolish of you, and I do so hate foolish opponents.”

“I can,” he says. “I consider having a whole face my best advantage.”

Voldemort sneers at that, seems to be coming up with a good counter, but then changes his mind.

“Then go ahead,” he says, sweeping his arms out in invitation. “Come get me, Harry. I welcome the challenge.”

That would be stupid. There is some trap here, some hideous mental trap. If he touches this Voldemort-in-the-dark-tunnel figure, he will never wake up. Or he will wake up with someone else in control. No matter the outcome, it will not be in his favour.

“I don’t need to do it now. I’d rather do it in person,” he says lightly. “So much more satisfying that way, don’t you think? I haven’t spent five years training myself to beat you just to deny myself the opportunity to hit you in your ugly face.”

Voldemort snarls in outrage, but it seems obvious to him that he has the upper hand. “So, you are trying to become a great wizard, Harry? Borrowing on what your betters have done and thinking that your youthful body will be enough? You really are foolish. Why do you hide in Hogwarts, if you think you can best me? Why not come out and face me, Harry?”

“I’m not that dumb!” he protests. “Like I’m going to leave the protection of the castle when I don’t know how to kill you yet? I’m staying here until I find the perfect way to kill you.”

Voldemort throws his head back and laughs. “Impossible! How many times must I tell you? I cannot die! You stay in Hogwarts, Harry, do that. Comfort yourself with the idea that someday you will defeat me, if it helps. Meanwhile, I will destroy everything you love and make the

world as I desire. No one can oppose me. Certainly not that addled old man and you, his pet.”

He allows himself to become upset and tries to make himself seem red-faced with embarrassment and outrage. He’s not sure he has a physical body for Voldemort to look at, but it hardly matters, with the dark wizard in his mind to get it directly from the source.

“Just you wait, snake-face! You’ll get what’s coming to you! You’re evil!”

Voldemort laughs and beckons yet again for an attack. Instead, he adopts an attitude of retreating, spitting curses and meaningless rhetoric as he goes. Voldemort seems to give up on the idea of luring him forward, and begins to fade. He can feel his mind becoming more alert, somewhere in its conscious part, and the retreat becomes rapid.

“I’ll get you if Dumbledore doesn’t!” he shouts to the tiny figure. This is the last thing he is able to say.

“Harry, wake up, for the love of Morgana!”

Harry shrinks from the sensation of cold and cracks an eyelid. Neville is there, yanking his sheets away from him. He moans. His scar is throbbing with a pain he hasn’t felt in a long time, but he clenches his hands into his pillow to keep himself from touching it. He doesn’t want anyone to know.

All he can do now is trust that Professor Snape will give Voldemort the proper picture of Harry, as a coward and as an immature puppet of Dumbledore’s. Without Snape’s cooperation, that whole conversation will become too obviously an act. Speaking of which, he’d better get out of bed and to Snape’s class on time, if he wanted any help from the man. He’d obviously missed his morning run, which meant he would have to take it tonight and disrupt his study routine.

He tried to get up to get his uniform, and fell on the floor instead. Surprised, he just lay there for a moment, feeling his cheek pressing into the carpet. He tried to convince himself he’d tripped, but he hadn’t. He’d just . . . fallen over. How weird.

“Harry? Harry, mate, what’s wrong?”

“Not sure,” he answered. He didn’t know which one of his roommates was doing the asking, which worried him. “I just fell down, I think. Move.”

The person kneeling beside him turned out to be Ron, and he moved to allow Harry room to get up. He moved in to take Harry’s arm and help him up, but Harry waved him away.

“That was weird,” he commented, going to where his uniform was hung up. “I must have gotten out of bed too fast or something. I felt woozy for a second, then wham! I’m on the floor.”

“Harry, maybe you—”

Ron didn’t finish the thought, because when Harry bent over to pull up his trousers, he fell again. This time, he couldn’t stop his fingers from massaging his aching scar as he lay there and tried to figure out what was going on. Why did he keep falling down?

“Are you sick?” Neville asked him.

Harry thought about that for a few seconds. “Yes,” he said cautiously. “I think I must be. But I can’t afford to miss class. I’ll have to go see Pomfrey during lunch.”

He found his feet again, but he decided to sit on the bed while he dressed. He saw his roommates exchanging worried looks, but he ignored them as much as he ignored his weirdly woozy head and the pain from his scar. This was the last thing he could deal with right now. There was too much to do to be laid up with some bug!

He held himself together all the way to the common room, where he fell again trying to get out of the portrait hole. At that point, his friends gave up on trying to speak to him, and simply grabbed hold of him and dragged him to the infirmary.

“Exhaustion,” Madam Pomfrey declared with barely a glance at him. “Put him down on the bed there and let him sleep.”

“Are you sure?” Ron inquired.

“Quite sure, Mr. Weasley. He will probably sleep the rest of the day and night. If he is better tomorrow, I will send someone to tell you. I would like him to be escorted back to his dormitory after I release him.”

His roommates nodded gravely, and Harry scowled at them and their worried looks. Exhaustion, honestly. He couldn't be here because he was tired, it was ludicrous. He was, however, worried about getting up again, since he thought he had developed rather a pattern of falling down.

He did refuse any sleep aids, though. And he very carefully and deliberately reconstructed his mental blocks, and asked for a sheet of paper to send a note to Snape, then thought better of committing such things to paper and asked if Pomfrey would get his godfather. Sirius would want to know what had happened, and he'd make sure Professor Snape was told as well. Pomfrey wanted to refuse, but Harry became so agitated that she agreed.

By the time Sirius got there, Harry was drifting in and out of sleep again, despite his determination to keep it together until he talked to Sirius. Sirius squeezed his hand and told him very fondly and quietly that he was an idiot. Harry was beginning to suspect that he was, but he was too tired to deal with it at that point, so he simply made sure Sirius understood what was going on, and fell asleep with his hand still clutching at his godfather's.

Pomfrey didn't release him until midafternoon the next day. Harry didn't sleep, despite her dire predictions that he would be back here within a few days in he didn't. He spent the late morning and early afternoon feverishly completing the schoolwork he was currently missing out on. Then he pacified her by taking a short nap and bouncing out of bed with bright eyes and cheerful demeanor, and she agreed to let him go.

He was still tired, but two days off was more than he could afford. He had things to do, he'd missed Quidditch practice, and he needed to talk to Dumbledore about what had happened.

Harry took a circuitous route back to Gryffindor Tower, trying to avoid most of the students who were still finishing up the day's classes. He thought he would change clothes before delivering his homework to his teachers and going to see Dumbledore. He would need to get back to studying tonight, but after so much sleep, it shouldn't be a problem to stay up late.

Despite his hurry, he stopped when he heard something odd. Crying in a girls' bathroom wasn't that strange, but it was in this one. For a girl to be crying in this totally abandoned lavatory meant she was really alone and more than commonly upset. It would be a nice thing to do to check on her. Except . . . it didn't really sound like a girl.

Harry decided that it couldn't hurt to at least peek in the door and see if the girl needed help. He was so surprised by the sight that he didn't move.

Draco Malfoy was leaning over the sink, washing his face despite the fact that he was still crying a bit. His hands were shaking, and he stopped washing to look up at himself in the mirror. He took on a disgusted expression.

He looked like a wraith. He'd gone from pale to ashen at some point, and his bones had become more prominent, so that the dim light from the murky windows caused shadows to stretch over his face. Harry hadn't noticed it happening, but it must have taken months to make him look so skinny and haunted. His reddened eyes didn't help. Harry had known that Draco's life had taken a distinctly different turn this year, but he hadn't really paid that much attention. Draco had sort of ceased to be his problem.

"I don't want this," he said to the mirror. "I never wanted it like this."

He rolled up his sleeve and began scrubbing his arm in the water from the sink. He scrubbed ferociously, with all the strength in his

skinny arms. The skin around the Dark Mark on his arm began to turn an angry red, and still he scrubbed.

“You said I would be powerful. You didn’t say I had to kill children,” he muttered as he scrubbed. “I won’t. I won’t do it. I can’t. I don’t even know how, I don’t think it will work . . .”

He kept scrubbing, faster and faster, until he began to cry again, collapsing against the sink, and his sleeve fell over the mark on his arm—that was now, Harry saw, oozing blood in a couple of places.

“This is so stupid,” he whispered. “Look at yourself. You’re pathetic.”

The pep talk didn’t seem to help.

Harry must have breathed too loudly, or made the door squeak or something. He wasn’t sure what noise he made, or even if Draco just suddenly felt the eyes on him. Draco spun around with a gasp and immediately straightened up, using all the poise he could muster while tear tracks were emblazoned on his face.

“Potter. What do you want?”

“Nothing. Thought you were a girl, thought I could help. I’ll just leave you to it, shall I?”

Draco’s mouth was working like he meant to say something, so Harry paused politely.

“Simpleton, we’re-all-going-to-save-each-other, Potter. What are you doing in your pyjamas?”

“I just got out of the infirmary, if you must know. Sorry my appearance doesn’t meet your standards.”

“Nothing about you meets my standards, Potter,” Draco declared with a slightly hysterical laugh. “Not your tatty nightclothes nor your empty rhetoric.”

“Which rhetoric?”

"I'm not a hero," he said in a high, sing-song voice. "Let's all be heroes together. Like you don't think you're special."

"I don't think I'm special. I think I'm dedicated. Big difference. As for the rest of that interview, I don't remember a single piece of empty rhetoric. I was being honest. Especially about everyone having their part. It means that I value each individual person in this fight that much more."

"The sad thing is, I think I believe you," Draco said with a pitying look. "You are so terribly naïve, Potter."

"I'm sure I am. Look, Draco, I don't care if you disapprove of me. I never did. I don't live my life for anyone's approval, much less yours. I mean, look at the great decisions you've been making," he said with a brief gesture at his own forearm, causing a flash of panic in Draco's eyes. "I don't need it to know that I'm on the right side. Something I don't think you can say. But you made it pretty clear that you're not interested in what I think, so I'll let you be. Bye."

He took a page out of Remus' book, and left before Draco could argue. He could just see the whole thing escalating into a serious fight, and ending up right back in the infirmary. More likely Draco on that last bit, but then he'd have to go around feeling bad, and that would totally disrupt his studies.

"Harry!" Hermione called as soon as he got into the common room. She was sitting with some of the other girls at one of the tables, and she jumped up to meet him.

"Hey, Hermione."

She placed her hands on her hips. "Did you sneak out?"

"Madam Pomfrey said I could go."

"You don't look well enough to leave. You still look very tired and overstressed."

“Hermione,” he chuckled, “if a stay in the infirmary could cure that, I’d be there every weekend.”

She didn’t appear to find it funny.

He glanced over and found Burgar with a couple of other seventh-year blokes, near the fire playing a game of some kind.

“Don’t worry about Jonathan, Harry, he is sulking.”

“Why?”

“Because he didn’t want me to go see you yesterday and I did it anyway.”

“You did?” he said, unable to help his smile. He ached to draw her into a hug, the way he would have a year ago. Just that much, give him just that much again.

“Of course I did, you ninny. Didn’t I just say to you that you needed to take better care of yourself because I’d be so upset if something happened to you?”

He shrugged. “I remember. I’m just not very good at it, see.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, that I remember.” Then she took him by the hands and led him to sit down beside her on one of the most comfortable couches. A look from her had the other occupants scurrying. “I should have remembered that you need me to remind you when you’re getting too wrapped up in something. I promise that I will try to keep a better eye on you from now on.”

Harry frowned at her. “Don’t you think Jonathan will be a little upset?”

Hermione shrugged. “I think we’ve broken up. He kissed me and it was awfully boring. I told him I didn’t see our relationship moving forward.”

Harry pouted. “You let him kiss you? I never got to kiss you.”

“Well, if you’re as bad as Jonathan is, you never will.”

Harry grinned at that. “I wouldn’t worry on that score.” Then he caught himself and gave her an anxious look. “Are you still mad at me for the other girls?”

Hermione sighed, squeezed his hands, looked down at them. “I wasn’t really mad at you, exactly. I just didn’t think I was good enough for you. I mean, you told me you were happy with me, but I didn’t think it was true. And I was afraid, too. I thought I couldn’t handle it. All the things that you face, all the things that are still to come. How could I be big enough to stand up to them? I thought there was someone else out there who could handle it better than I could.”

“And now?”

“Now I know that I can’t let fear rule my life anymore,” she said, looking up into his eyes. “Nobody is really big enough to stand up to this, but maybe I can handle just being your companion. I know there isn’t anybody else who can do research for you like I can, at the very least,” she said in a teasing tone.

“There is nobody like you at all,” he said firmly. “Not for me.”

Hermione smiled sadly. “Yes, well, now that I have seen how excruciatingly lonely you’ve been, I think I believe you.” She welled up with tears. “Will you forgive me, Harry? I was so fearful and it made me so selfish.”

“I’m not sure that I have anything to forgive you for,” he said slowly. “You’re allowed to make up your own mind about things. You can’t make your decisions based on how it affects me.”

“I can if I want to,” she said in a lofty tone. “Besides, that’s only one reason. I still think Voldemort is an evil old man and I can’t wait to get back to work bringing him down.”

Harry laughed at the gleam in her eyes when she said it, and brought his forehead to rest against hers. “Hermione, it’s going to take days to catch you up on everything you’ve missed.”

Chapter Ten

It was three days before Harry got up the nerve to put his arm around Hermione while they were sitting together. He was afraid he'd scare her off again. But all it really did was make her impatient with him.

They partnered up at the DL meeting they went to, the night after Harry returned from his brief stay in the hospital wing. They wiped the floor with Ron and Parvati, then with Ginny and Cho. Neville and Ernie gave them trouble, but they held their own. The two of them began to study together again. They politely invited Jonny to join them in their rune translation exercises, but he seemed to be a poor loser. He preferred to sit across the room and do his exercises with the two other seventh-years in his class, and direct dark looks at the happy pair. They didn't really notice.

Hermione wasn't having any of Harry's hesitation. She was constantly taking hold of his hand or touching him in some small way when they talked. She was carefully and resolutely convincing him of what she wanted, namely to resume a romantic relationship as well as their friendship. Whereas Harry was still anxiously trying to prove the same thing he had last year, which was that he wasn't so horny he couldn't keep his hands to himself around a very shy girlfriend. It was an extremely exasperating position for Hermione. She was quite certain that she'd moved beyond that stage, but Harry wasn't getting the hint.

To be fair, he had other things on his mind. Every since the interview (which she'd read with so much delight that she was sure its publication was the beginning of the end of things with Jonathan) he'd been dealing with the reactions to it. He got a standing ovation in the common room, but he was absolutely bombarded with letters that contained a strong mix of good and bad.

Madam Bones, whom he told Hermione was his best ally in the Ministry, sent him a letter full of praise for Miss Garnet but also full of caution that Harry should hold himself back a little more in the future, be more circumspect. Hermione disagreed, but Harry seemed to take it seriously. Cornelius Fudge sent a letter that was basically a polite dismissal of the whole thing. He seemed to think that Harry should have used the opportunity to create more solidarity with himself and

the Ministry. When Harry finished reading that one, he calmly lit it on fire and dropped it into a jug of pumpkin juice.

“He’s getting sacked any day now,” he confided in her. “He’s been completely ineffective since Voldemort started showing up again, and he can’t count on my popularity to prop him up anymore.”

Mostly, the letters were positive. A lot of people who hadn’t believed in Harry thus far had become sudden converts to his cause. For some reason, everything he’d said in meetings with the Ministry was dismissed as propaganda, but this interview was bringing people off the fence in droves. It was rather alarming, he told her. He hadn’t imagined that simply getting published unedited would convince so many people to throw themselves into danger.

The ones that weren’t positive were really, really bad, though. He laughed off the death threats and open mockery. He said he felt sorry for the people who were so insecure that they felt the need to send such things.

“Does that include Malfoy?” she prodded, knowing the incident he’d told her about in the abandoned bathroom was bothering him.

He glared down into his breakfast. “He had way too many chances already.”

She just looked at him.

“Yes, I feel sorry for him,” he grumped.

The worst came at breakfast on Friday. Ginny and Dean, who were (miraculously) still dating, were sitting beside Harry and Hermione. It was the moment when Harry had just decided that it would be okay to slide his arm around his girlfriend because she looked good enough to eat this morning and she’d want to see the latest letter, anyway. She leaned into him with a brilliant smile and stole a slice of banana out of his cereal.

When he opened the innocent-looking envelope, it exploded. Not with fire, but with some thick, goopy substance that splattered out and

landed all over his robes and face, even getting into his hair. Hermione jerked back with a shriek, but it was too late, it got her, too.

YOU WANTED TO BE AN EXAMPLE OF SOMEONE WHO RESISTS THE DARK LORD. NOW YOU ARE.

Harry and Hermione stared at one another, stunned. Harry glanced over. Dean and Ginny, who'd been sharing a mid-breakfast smooch (which he'd just been thinking was brave of Ginny what with Dean's morning breath), had also been caught by the explosion and flecks of it spattered across their shocked faces. Harry looked down the length of the table, and then across the Great Hall. Everyone was staring at them.

They were covered in blood.

The common room was quiet that night. The Quidditch team was practicing, but Harry had begged off, and a lot of students had been so eager to escape the oppressive pensiveness in their house that they'd gone out to watch. The people who were inside were quiet and introspective, for the most part. They gave Harry and Hermione a lot of space.

But still, Harry took her up into his dormitory to speak to her, for the things he wanted to talk about were not for another's ears. He hadn't had time to get her caught up on anything important yet, so he sat on Ron's bed and she sat on his and he spoke as quickly as possible. Merfolk, Horcrux identification, Dumbledore's failing health, Harry's fever-pitch in his studies, Remus and the werewolves and the Wolfsbane potions . . . He saved the Deathly Hallows for the end. He was terribly embarrassed to admit to her that he'd been meeting with a well-known crackpot to get information on something she thought was a myth.

But she just asked to see his cloak. She'd seen it before, back when he first got it. He hadn't used it much. He was a little afraid to, seeing as how it was one of the three most legendary objects in all of magical Britain.

"You're certain?" she asked, letting the silky material spill through her fingers.

He sat beside her on his bed. "Yes."

She nodded, accepting the idea. She knew Harry too well to think he was stupid or a liar, and therefore she believed him. "And you really think Dumbledore knows where the Elder Wand is?"

"I do."

"But you haven't asked him yet."

Harry shook his head mutely.

"You just told me you don't think you can defeat Voldemort without it, and that you think Dumbledore isn't going to last much longer. What are you waiting for?"

Harry shrugged. It was easy enough on the surface, when you said it like that.

"Harry. What are you afraid of?"

He looked down at his hands, clasped together between his knees as he hunched over the edge of the bed. "Myself," he whispered. "I want to hurt him, Hermione. I've imagined it. I got angry and got in some fights when we lived in Brazil, but I was twelve and it wasn't like this. I've never had this . . . desire. To really hurt someone. And I'm afraid of what I'd become if I find the wand. If I have all the power, what if I don't want to let it go?"

Tears dripped onto his arms as he leaned over the bed and struggled against the torturous pain eating him up. He was surprised to see them. He hadn't noticed the tight feeling in his throat and his chest. He hadn't even really known how afraid he was until now.

"Harry," she murmured, and pulled his head onto her shoulder.

He didn't want to do this. He was supposed to be the stronger of the two of them. He identified himself by his cool, logical approach to life and his status as protector of the weak. So he tried to take a few deep breaths and sit back up and tell her the last thing she needed to know. She didn't know about tomorrow yet . . .

He melted into her, burying himself in her arms and trying not to cry over how much he'd missed having someone in his life that could give him this. He hadn't known how sad he was over everything that was happening, but the fight against tears was so hard that he gave up. He began to feel exhausted and fell asleep mumbling his apologies while Hermione ran her fingers through his hair.

Hermione drew the curtains around the bed when she heard someone coming up the stairs and opening the door. She knew Harry wouldn't want anyone to see him this way, sleeping with salty streaks on his cheeks and his head in her lap. He had to keep up the appearance of enduring strength until this was over, much as she hated the idea. It might be nice to have a hero who was honest, but a weepy hero didn't really provoke a lot of faith.

A hand slipped in and drew back the curtains. Hermione drew her wand and had to stop her brain in the middle of casting a nonverbal Stunning spell. Her wand shot out a pathetic red fizzle.

Sirius smiled at her. "Hello, Miss Granger."

"Professor Black."

"I see the two of you are back together."

"I guess so."

"Then just call me Sirius. Don't tell your classmates I let you do that, though."

"Okay, sir."

"I came up to check on him. I've been getting reports from Ron ever since he got out of the hospital wing, but I thought after what

happened this morning, he might actually admit to me that he's not in tip-top shape. He thinks he needs to protect me or something." Sirius indicated how he felt about that with a very dramatic roll of his eyes.

"Well, he cried a little and fell asleep," she said dryly. "But I'm taking care of him."

"Good," Sirius said firmly.

She gave him a puzzled look. "He said you told him to leave me alone."

Sirius shrugged. "I did. And he did leave you alone. But you still somehow ended up together again, so I think my objections are probably a lost cause. Besides, I think I've changed my mind. I always liked you, you know. You are the only person I can think of who will be able to stay with him through the end of this."

She smiled serenely. "He tells me it's because I'm stubborn. He's probably right, but I know he needs me and I think I might need him, too."

"At least he's getting some sleep. I can tell that he's worried about tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

Sirius frowned. "He didn't tell you yet."

"Well, he told me as much as he could before he sort of fell apart. What happens tomorrow?"

"Dumbledore thinks he's located one of the Horcruxes. He's taking Harry with him to fetch it tomorrow night. I wanted to come with them, but they think it would be too obvious. I don't. Dumbledore even wanted to bring Harry, but . . ."

"But he's afraid he won't be able to do it on his own," Hermione said in a quiet voice.

"Yeah," Sirius sighed. He sat down on the bed next to the two teenagers. Harry still didn't wake, although he did mumble something and wrap his arms around Hermione's leg.

She paused a moment to tenderly brush the hair out of his face. "Professor? What are we going to do when the headmaster is gone?"

Sirius shook his head. "I have no idea."

They sat in silence for some time.

"Professor?"

"Yes? And it's Sirius, by the way."

"I want to ask you something, but I'm afraid it's inappropriate."

The man smirked at her and made a casual inspection of his fingernails (which were dirty and broken from work at the werewolf community and from tinkering with an old motorbike). "If Harry has told you anything about me, you ought to know that you and I have very different ideas about what is inappropriate."

She felt her face turning red and huffed at him.

"Well, if you two are back together, you've got to get used to me," he protested. "I'm dissolute and tactless."

"You're horrid," she said, tossing her hair. "I'd forgotten."

"What were you going to ask me, Miss Granger?"

"You could call me Hermione. I might find it easier to stop calling you Professor if you called me by name first."

"All right. What is it, Hermione?"

"Do you ever wish that you hadn't come back?"

The surprised look on his face made her blush.

“Sorry, sir, I told you it was inappropriate.”

“No, it isn’t. I’m just shocked that you would think to ask. There isn’t anyone else in this entire country who thinks we had a choice. The answer is, every damn day.”

Sirius placed his hand on Harry’s back, and still the teenager didn’t wake up. He did frown rather spectacularly, so Sirius took his hand away.

“I’ve always wondered if he might have been able to live a normal life if I kept him away from England. But that’s just me thinking like a dad. I know better than to think life can be lived in reverse. We’ve closed the curtain on running away, and now the hiding act is over, too. This is something new. And it frightens me how much it feels like the final act.”

“You don’t mean that you think we’ll fail?”

“No, I don’t think that. But I do think that once it’s over, this entire society is going to have to reinvent itself. Including us.”

Hermione looked down at her boyfriend, who frowned even in his sleep. “Not him, though.”

“Maybe not,” Sirius said, still frowning. “He’s made his whole life about not regretting who he is and about what he wants in spite of all this.”

Harry muttered something, and they both looked at him, then one another. They were both thinking that he was only pretending to be asleep, because Harry never talked in his sleep. But his frown only deepened, and his fingers clenched tight into the bedding. He was starting to sweat.

“Should we wake him up?” Hermione whispered.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think it’s . . .?”

“It might be.”

“We should wake him up.”

“What if he needs time to fight it off?”

The problem was solved for them. Harry’s eyes snapped open and he threw himself off of Hermione and off the bed, standing up with wild eyes, hair and clothes in disarray.

“I have to find Sirius!” he cried out.

“Harry . . . I’m right here.”

The crazy look faded a little, and he focused on Sirius. “Oh. Good. Sirius, you have to get them out. The Bones family. Madam Amelia, Susan’s parents, everybody. Right now!”

Sirius jumped up. “How many are coming for them?”

Harry shook his head, simultaneously combing his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know. Half an hour, or less. That much, I know.”

“Does he know you saw?”

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Sirius, wait! I don’t know if Professor Snape is supposed to know. We can’t blow his cover.”

Sirius thought for only a second. “We don’t have to. Remus and Tonks are at the werewolf compound, I’ll go get them. And Kingsley Shacklebolt. There is absolutely no reason that the four of us wouldn’t be meeting with Madam Bones to be talking politics, or drafting a petition, or something. We can hold off whoever comes.”

“I’m coming with you,” Harry said, rummaging in his trunk for his cloak.

“No,” Sirius said firmly. “We can’t risk it.”

Harry stood up indignantly, cloak in hand. “You think I couldn’t handle myself in the fight?”

Sirius gave him a quelling look. “I’m not an idiot. But if you’d calm down for a moment, you’d remember that you have something to do tomorrow that you won’t be able to do if you’re injured. I can call for other backup. There isn’t anyone else Dumbledore would take with him.”

Harry let out a heavy breath, and then sat down on the bed. “You’re right. And that sucks.” He handed Sirius the cloak. “This might come in handy.”

Sirius took the cloak with a nod. “I’ll let you know when I get back.”

Harry nodded in reply. “Okay.”

Then Sirius was gone, running all-out to get out of the castle’s wards to where he could Apparate.

Hermione made a scoffing noise. “Boys. A girl would have reminded him that she loved him and that she wanted him to be safe or something.”

“That’s because girls talk too much,” Harry said. Then he did a double-take. “Did I fall asleep while we were talking?”

“Right in my lap,” she said without a hint of embarrassment.

Harry immediately placed himself back in that position, laying his head on her leg and smiling up at her. “Hope you weren’t bored.”

“I had a lot to think about.”

“I still haven’t told you about tomorrow, have I?”

“Sirius told me.”

“Oh, Sirius, is it?”

“He said I didn’t have to call him Professor Black anymore.”

Harry smiled and said, “Good,” but his eyes were far away. He lifted his hand to hers and twined their fingers together and didn’t say anything for a long time. He eventually Summoned some homework to the bed, and they stayed there studying even when the other boys came in. They did draw the curtains when Seamus dropped his trousers and started doing a suggestive dance with his pyjama bottoms.

At midnight, they went down to the common room. Professor McGonagall didn’t bother them at all, so they knew she’d been informed about the Bones situation. They fall asleep together on the sofa about one o’clock in the morning. At two-thirty, Sirius tiptoed in, moving cautiously in a room lit only by the embers of the fire.

“Harry, Hermione,” he whispered.

Harry woke immediately, but since Hermione had her legs thrown across him, he didn’t get up.

“Well?” he whispered.

“They’re safe. Everyone’s safe.”

“Good.”

“When I showed up to get Remus and Tonks, his friends Neil and Jeremy insisted on coming along. The Death Eaters were actually outnumbered.”

“Voldemort?”

“He disappeared before anyone could engage him.”

“Did he know it was me?”

"No. When they showed up, we were all sitting around the parlour with about twenty lawbooks arguing about whether or not there was precedent for . . . Merlin knows. Amelia, Remus and Kingsley were the only ones who had any idea what they were talking about. But it looked good, which is the point. And we arrested two of them."

"Who?"

"Macnair and Crabbe."

"Would have really made my night if you'd said Lestrangle and Malfoy," Harry muttered, rubbing his eyes.

"Are you kidding? Voldemort wouldn't waste them on such a small assignment."

"Well. If he'd known you were there . . ."

"But he didn't, so we win. Thanks to you, Harry."

Harry yawned. "Yeah. I should go to bed." He looked at Hermione, still sleeping with her arm cradling her head and her legs draped over Harry's. "I don't want to wake her up, but I can't carry her to her room without setting off the alarm."

Sirius shook his head in disappointment. "Harry."

Harry grinned at him. "Really?"

"Figured out how to turn it off my fifth year. Of course, I didn't have any reason to use that knowledge until seventh year, but I do like to plan ahead."

Harry rolled his eyes, already on his feet with Hermione in his arms. "Just do it, would you? She's heavier than she looks."

In reply, Sirius threw the cloak over his godson's head and laughed to himself as he watched a pair of legs and Hermione's torso float up the stairs.

The first part was very simple. Harry kissed Hermione on the cheek and left her in the library, then hurried to Dumbledore's office and called Sirius from there to say he'd check in when they returned. Dumbledore thought it best if he was seen leaving the castle alone, but Harry wasn't about to lose his cloak by possible misadventure, so he just had Dumbledore cast a Disillusionment Charm on him. Then they left.

When Dumbledore said they would have to swim to the entrance of the cave, Harry stared at him.

"We can't Apparate?"

"I think it unlikely we will be able to do so without triggering an alarm of some kind."

"All right, then," Harry said philosophically, and began stripping off his clothes. With robes, shoes, and socks left safely on the bank, he dove in. He stayed behind Dumbledore, afraid the older man wouldn't do well, but he was a smart swimmer, using the motion of the water in his favour. Harry didn't know why Dumbledore wanted to swim with his robes on, but he bit his tongue to avoid having to see skinny white old-man legs.

Once they were again on the ground, Harry Summoned his clothes back. Dumbledore was feeling around the entrance and beginning to look disappointed. By the time Harry had gotten dressed, Dumbledore had already cut himself open and dribbled blood on the entrance to gain their admittance. Harry made a face.

"That's just cheesy."

"I quite agree," Dumbledore said.

Dumbledore was figuring this out as he went, Harry realised. He watched Dumbledore work and find the boat.

"Sir? How are you able to guess what spells are being used? Is it some kind of revealing spell?"

Dumbledore just smiled. "You really are an amazing pupil, Harry."

"I really can't help it, you know. So will you show me?"

Most of Dumbledore's ability to arrive at an intelligent conclusion was through knowing the caster of the spells, it turned out. But apparently, if you spent enough years around enough types of protective spells, they began to feel differently to you. Certain spells had a certain resonance that Dumbledore had learned to recognise. Harry closed his eyes and walked slowly from the cave's entrance to the edge of the lake where the boat waited. He did, indeed, feel something different. A sort of buzzing in his head that changed pitch as he moved.

"I suppose that's all the time we have for my first lesson," he sighed, and looked down at the boat. "I don't like the look of this."

"I think we may have a problem."

"Voldemort wouldn't just leave a boat for anyone who happened along, right? What do you think it will do?"

"It will only carry one of us. I imagine that there is something waiting on the other side that will be difficult for one person to handle alone. If you were any other teenager, I would think your magical weight was low enough to risk it, but I'm afraid that you have developed too far for that."

Harry looked to the centre of the lake, where waited (they assumed) the Horcrux. "I'll go get it. You wait here."

"No, Harry. We do not know what further dangers there may be. It will have to be me."

"We're both going," Harry concluded, and carefully set his wand down on the ground. "Um, sir? There's something I haven't told you. About me, that is. But there's really no help for it now. Neither of us is going to let the other one go alone, and if only one of us can be in the boat . . ."

Dumbledore looked concerned.

There wasn't much choice left, and Harry let go of the last secret he had from Dumbledore.

Harry transformed.

He'd gotten good enough at it that it didn't take long anymore. He'd already grasped his wand in his talons and gained some height by the time Dumbledore stopped gaping. Harry spread his wings, tilted, and began to circle the boat, impatient for the old man to get a move on. He could explain things when they were on the other side and he was human again. Dumbledore seemed to get it, and climbed into the boat. Harry kept an eye on the dead things in the lake, but they were quiet. Perfect. Obviously Voldemort hadn't thought about random owls who might have a vested interest in pieces of his soul.

Harry transformed back into himself when he arrived at island in the centre of the lake. He was waiting with a smile when Dumbledore landed the boat.

"I should explain," Harry began.

"You are an Animagus," Dumbledore said in a smooth, unperturbed voice. "I imagine you did not tell me because you are unregistered and you believe it would be wise to keep it secret."

Harry shrugged. "Okay, yeah, it's a simple explanation. So, now you know."

"Yes. It has solved one problem already this evening, so I cannot find it in me to object."

They faced the basin.

"I reckon we don't just reach in and grab the locket," Harry said slowly.

Dumbledore shrugged, and did reach in. "Ah, apparently not. It was worth trying though."

“Don’t suppose we can tip the basin over.”

“I don’t believe so, no.”

“He wants us to drink it. Poison?”

“I do not think it will be lethal. At least not immediately.”

“Yeah, he’d want us to suffer first. Alone, of course, because only one person gets to come in the boat.”

“I will drink it,” Dumbledore said.

“Are you kidding? Being the younger and stronger of the two of us, I’m a lot more likely to be able to handle it . . .whatever it is.”

“And I, being the older and weaker of the two of us, am far more dispensable.”

Harry crossed his arms. “Hah.”

“If you are incapacitated, I may not be able to get both of us safely back. You are far more able to do so if I am similarly incapacitated.”

“Headmaster, sir, with all due respect, that’s stupid. You’re not in any shape to tax yourself with something like this, and I am.”

“Harry, that is exactly my point.”

Harry frowned very hard and looked at the ground stubbornly.

“Harry, my boy,” Dumbledore said gently. “I am not in any shape to get us out of here if something happens to you. I am already approaching the end of the time that has been given to me, and it is far more expedient that I experience the effects of this potion, whatever it may be.”

“Expedient, my muscular buttocks,” Harry muttered.

Dumbledore drank.

He got through the first few cups on his own, then he began pleading with something that wasn't there. Harry looked at the Inferi floating below the surface of the lake, looked at Dumbledore, who was beginning to cry, and sighed.

"To hell with this, anyway."

He took the goblet and began bailing the potion out as fast as he could. The moment the first cupful hit the ground, he heard splashes in the lake. The Inferi were going to start attacking, then. Great. He bailed faster. He heard Dumbledore gasp out a few spells, and glanced over his shoulder to see a couple of the cold, fish-like bodies writhing around in flames. Gross, but awesome. There was one almost on top of him, and he beamed it in the head with the goblet while he reached in and grabbed the locket.

The locket flashed in the meagre light, swinging by the chain from his hand, as he swung around to see a veritable army of dead bodies jumping from the lake and converging on every side of the island.

"Okay, so drinking the damn potion would have been better." Then he picked up his wand and got to work. He didn't think about the fact that this would likely be the worst test of his magical abilities he'd yet experienced. He just knew they were in trouble, and fell to it. The Inferi who'd wrapped his strong arms around Dumbledore's leg fell back when Harry's spell sliced the arms clean off its body.

They were surrounded. Harry cast a Blasting Curse that threw all the Inferi on the island back and onto the ground.

"Um . . ." he whimpered, thinking hard during the mere seconds he'd bought himself. There was no way to get to the boat now, not unless Dumbledore stopped crying and starting fighting. He summoned the small boat and set it down directly in front of Dumbledore. "Get in, sir."

Dumbledore did, although he was looking at Harry like the boy was crazy. Which the boy might be, but he was getting them the hell out of there.

“Reducto! Reducto! Reducto! Reducto! Reducto!” Spinning in a quick circle, Harry cast with all his strength, over and over, switching to non-verbal because his tongue started tripping over the word. The shores of the island began to crumble, and the Inferi fell back into the water. He dragged the boat to the now much-closer lake water and jumped in. He began to propel them to the exit, praying fervently that his arm wouldn’t get chomped off while he held his wand in the water. But he needn’t have worried. Dumbledore had recovered enough to begin casting fire curses all over the place, lighting any Inferi who got near enough to their boat into a flaming torch, showing the way out. Harry began bringing his wand up for brief moments to help.

Thus, with jerks and pauses and a series of fiery explosions, they got out of the cave more or less intact. The Horcrux never left Harry’s death grip.

When Dumbledore cast the Disillusionment Charm on Harry to sneak him back into Hogwarts, Harry returned the favour. Dumbledore had yet to recover from the effects of the potion he’d been drinking, and Harry didn’t want any of the students, or even the professors, to see Dumbledore right now. In fact, Harry ended up pulling the old wizard’s arm over his shoulder and supporting him as they quietly crept up to his office.

Harry called Sirius immediately to tell him they’d returned, but fudged on the details of the trip. He was more concerned about making sure the headmaster was okay. He was incredibly pale and looking shaky. He said goodbye to Sirius and turned back to the headmaster, who was petting Fawkes. Fawkes hooted softly, sadly, and dribbled tears over his master’s hands, but the one stayed blackened and ugly, while the other looked palsied.

“Sir? We should lock this away somewhere for the night, and deal with it when we’ve both had time to rest.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said absently. He did not follow that with a suggestion of a place to put the locket or even turn around.

“Sir, should I have Madam Pomfrey come up?”

“I do not think she can offer much help to me, Harry, but thank you.”

“Then I’ll leave this here with you and come back tomorrow so you can show me how to destroy it.”

“Very well, my boy.”

Harry was worried. When he left, he did go to Madam Pomfrey and offer the suggestion that checking on the headmaster might be a good idea. She vowed to bring him a potion for fatigue immediately. Harry wondered why, as he went to bed, that didn’t make him feel any better. He’d never seen Dumbledore cry before.

Sunday started out as a good day for Harry. He and Hermione snuck out (with Professor McGonagall’s permission) and hung out at home with Sirius in the afternoon. He was still feeling overwhelmed by the previous night’s excursion, and didn’t want to face any of his roommates. He told Sirius and Hermione the story of the locket’s retrieval, but left out how worried he was about the headmaster, and didn’t tell them how badly the potion had affected him. He and Hermione ended up studying through the late afternoon, since the end of the year was quickly approaching. Sirius, after grading some essays from the third-year students, decided to go visit the werewolves, leaving the teenagers with an admonition to get back to school by seven o’clock.

They studied in a rather lazy way, spending most of their time curled up in the parlour in a pool of sunshine, he nuzzling her hair and scribbling silly love poems on her notes, and she kissing his hands and laying her head across his textbook. It was amazing they accomplished anything, or perhaps not so amazing considering that they were the top two students in all their classes.

At five-thirty, they got very serious and ended up at opposite ends of the room so that Hermione could memorize some Potions recipes

and Harry could finish translating a passage from runes into English—and then translate it again into Mermish, just to keep up with his studies with Reed. They headed back to the school just before anyone would call looking for them.

At the entrance to the common room, Harry said goodnight to Hermione.

“You’re going to destroy it tonight for good?” Hermione whispered.

Harry just nodded.

“I’m glad,” she said, and dropped her head against his chest. “Just knowing those things are out there . . . Harry, I want to know if there’s anything more I can do to help. Whatever you need, you tell me. I want to be able to sleep at night again.”

He smiled at her, feeling her words like sharp knives and thinking Sirius might have been right about keeping her out of danger. “Thank you. I’ll tell you about it when I see you in the morning, yeah?”

She nodded, and got on her toes to plant a very quick kiss on his surprised lips. “Goodnight, Harry,” she said, ducking into the portrait hole.

He smiled all the way to his confrontation with Voldemort’s soul.

The smile disappeared when he saw Dumbledore. He didn’t find it again for a long time after that night.

“Sir, you . . .” The thought that it might be rude to point out Dumbledore’s appearance came too late, and Harry didn’t feel like editing his thoughts anyway. “You look horrible.”

“I do apologise, Harry. Are you ready to begin?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, his voice hollow as he took in Dumbledore’s pale, sunken face and slow gait.

“I placed the locket in this cupboard last night, and I have not removed it yet. I thought it was far more prudent to wait until we were both present before I subjected myself to any influence it may have.”

“Uh, good thinking, sir.”

“I must tell you how impressed and proud I was last night, Harry. You did wonderfully.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said, humbly. He could have done better. He could have found a way to get the locket without causing this damage to Dumbledore’s already fragile health.

“Let us begin, then.”

Dumbledore opened the cupboard, and retrieved the locket. His face immediately took on a very worried cast. Harry stepped closer and looked down. He slowly picked it up. There was nothing that seemed to indicate its connection to Voldemort. He didn’t feel weird about holding it or anything. With a glance at the headmaster for permission, he stuck a fingernail under the edge and pried it open.

A piece of paper fell out.

Dumbledore drew a sharp breath, and Harry began to read the paper aloud.

“To the Dark Lord. I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know it was I who discovered your secret . . . Well, sir, it appears we’re not the first to stumble upon the truth about Voldemort.”

Feeling suddenly very short of breath, Harry handed the note over to Dumbledore, who read it to himself. He set it down on his desk and walked to his chair and sat down. He was white and silent. Harry wasn’t much better. This was not the real locket. All that danger they’d put themselves in, and someone else had gotten there first. The implications were staggering. If it was still there, Voldemort had never discovered the treachery, which seemed to indicate that he

didn't know the diary or the ring was destroyed, either. Not only that, but the Horcrux thief might still be alive.

"I wonder if this R.A.B. is still out there," Harry murmured.

Dumbledore made a groaning noise, and Harry snapped out of it. He turned a sharp look on the headmaster.

"Sir?"

His voice was high and frightened, but he wasn't worried about his image at this point.

"I am so tired . . ." Dumbledore murmured. "So much more to do . . ."

"Professor," Harry said in alarm, and hurried to his side. "What is it?"

"Harry, Madam Pomfrey is fully prepared with records of treatment she has given me. She will be able to prove I have been suffering from a long illness. If anyone asks you about it, I know you will be cautious about what you should say, so I do not worry about coaching you in a response. You know that the truth of this curse must be kept private."

"Sir, don't," Harry whispered.

Dumbledore raised his wand and a silvery shadow of his pet phoenix drifted out of his office. "I have called Severus, and I think it would be best if you left now, Harry."

He wasn't fully certain of what was happening, or wouldn't let himself be, but he wasn't going to leave. "Sir, let me stay. Until Professor Snape gets here," he added hastily, before Dumbledore could say no. "I'll go then."

Dumbledore murmured some noise of acceptance, and Harry found that he had nothing else to say. His heart was hammering, but he didn't know why. He dropped to his knee beside Dumbledore's chair, not willing to even leave his side to get his own chair. He was afraid of what Dumbledore wanted with Snape, and afraid of everything he

had just said. He was afraid of the truth behind this false Horcrux sitting on the desk . . .

He swept the locket and note off the desk and into his pocket hastily. As far as he was aware, Snape didn't know about the Horcruxes and never would. That man had his own part to play in the war. This part belonged to Harry.

Then he remembered what it was that he still needed to say.

"The Elder Wand," he blurted out. "You know where it is."

Dumbledore looked surprised by the subject being raised.

"I don't think I can face him without it," Harry confessed. "And all my research has led me to you."

"How long have you known that you would need to ask me?"

"Quite a while."

"But you waited, Harry. Why?"

"Because the power . . . seems like it's too much. But I know what I will use it for, and I will not allow myself anything but that."

"You think that you are strong enough for it?"

Harry raised his eyes. "I don't have to think that I am. I just have to be strong enough. I will be."

Dumbledore smiled with infinite sadness. "I have never let that wand out of my sight in fifty years."

Harry looked at Dumbledore's wand, stunned by the simplicity of it. "Really?"

"Harry, do you understand what it means, to take this? It means you must end your life undefeated, to break its power. That was my plan. Even now, I will not let it pass to you if you will not do the same."

Harry held his breath for a moment. "Yes, I know."

"Quickly, then," Dumbledore said, laying his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Expelliarmus," Harry whispered with regret. He hid the wand away in his robes as soon as it made the short hop into his hand.

"I think you will need this, as well," Dumbledore said, and removed the cracked ring from his curse-blackened fingers. Harry accepted the ring without question, dropping it into his pocket beside the locket and the note, just as the door opened. He stood up when Professor Snape entered. Harry had hardly spoken to him all year, except for a couple of grudgingly-enjoyed minor discussions about Potions theory in Snape's classroom, and he didn't know if he should say anything now.

"Harry, my boy," Dumbledore said, arresting him before he could step away from his side. "Never forget the faith I have in you."

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed. "No, sir. I won't. Thank you."

He took the first step away, and it felt like he dragged himself through thick mud. The second step was harder, not easier. Professor Snape moved in to take his place.

"I am afraid that the time has come, Severus," Dumbledore murmured. "Your place at Voldemort's side will be assured now."

Of course. It made sense that Dumbledore would use even this as a weapon in this war. Harry stopped walking, and turned back.

"I'm not leaving."

Professor Snape's face was fixed in stone, and his eyes glittered with anger. But it was Dumbledore, who looked only compassionate and patient, that spoke.

"No, Harry. You have your own task to do."

Harry took a stumbling step back toward them, feeling clumsy and lost. "But sir. If this is . . . If this . . . You should have people with you. You deserve to— to have people with you." Neville should be here. But if I go get him, they'll do it while I'm gone. "Let me stay. Please."

He again dropped to his knee at Dumbledore's side, and refused to move. If this was going to happen, he would be here when it did.

"Potter, you—" Snape began with unfathomable hate.

"May stay," Dumbledore said softly. His hand found its way onto Harry's shoulder again.

Snape appeared stumped by that, and he resorted to frowning.

"There are so many things that I feel I should say to you—both of you," Dumbledore said. "But I trust you. You know by now what must be done, and I trust you to carry it out in full. The two of you are wise enough and strong enough to withstand the things that I may not have prepared you for, and it is up to you now to finish what we have begun. And if you do not know of how much I care about you, my words now will have no meaning. Simply remember that I believe in you. Severus?"

His eyes were tortured. "You are certain that it must be now?"

Dumbledore placed his hands in his lap. "I am exhausted with pain, Severus, and I wish you to spare me the humiliation of doing this any more slowly. It is time for us both to take this last step, my boy."

Snape turned away for a moment, but his eyes swept over Harry as though confused about what, exactly, was occupying that space. Harry could feel a fine trembling in himself, just beginning. He wasn't sure he wanted to see this anymore, but it was too late. He'd chosen to stay, and even if he had to close his eyes and plug his ears, at least he would always know that he was there for Dumbledore, at the end.

But Professor Snape continued to hesitate, and Harry did something very impolite and something that if Snape had been in any way

prepared for, Harry wouldn't have been able to do. He listened. He stretched out with Legilimency and caught the fragments of his Potions professor's thoughts. They were not entirely coherent, but Harry heard enough. Bitterness, fear, respect, shame, grief, affection . . . they were all at war in the man's mind. But one coherent thought stuck out.

I don't want to do this.

Professor Snape's reluctance was comprised of so many swirling emotions that Harry nearly choked on the brief glimpse of them, but that was the only thing he really needed to know to make sense of it all. He did not want to kill the one man he truly admired or cared about. He understood the necessity of it, but abhorred the action. It would kill most of whatever was left of him to do it.

Harry stood up. "Professor Snape?"

He turned to Harry with a face that communicated nothing more than pride. It should have been admirable control, but this seemed like the wrong time and place to hide what he was feeling.

Harry closed the short distance between them and held out his hand. "Give me your wand. I'll give it back in a moment."

Perhaps Snape knew that Harry wouldn't ask for such a thing unless he had a really good reason. Perhaps he was so surprised by the sheer absurdity of the request that he didn't think at all. Whatever the reason, Snape let go when Harry's hand closed over his wand, and Harry backed away from him slowly.

He turned again, feeling nauseated and on the verge of passing out. His heart was pounding so hard that he was sweating, and his breath was ragged. He looked at Dumbledore and took strength from what he saw there. There was only a sense of utter and complete calm behind the exterior expression of pain. Dumbledore accepted this.

"I told you I would do it, whatever it was. Remember?" Harry whispered.

"I never could have hoped for as much as you've been willing to give, my boy. Thank you."

"No, sir, I have to thank you, for all the things you've taught me. I learned more from studying you than from the books you gave me. I'm going to miss you." His voice cracked on that. "I hope it's only like going to sleep."

He raised Professor Snape's wand.

"Headmaster," Professor Snape suddenly said in panic.

"All shall be well, Severus. Goodbye."

Harry allowed himself to be swept away by his feelings of loyalty and affection, by his desire not to see Dumbledore suffer, to spare him from dragging this out. He loved this old man, and he wanted what Dumbledore wanted, in that moment. It was the only way the words he was about to speak would do anything but destroy a little piece of Harry. He made himself want this to happen.

"Avada Kedavra," he whispered, looking right into the old man's eyes. So he knew the exact moment the light left them, and Dumbledore was gone, and there was only an ancient, broken body sitting there with the traces of a smile on its lips.

He didn't know how long they stood there, he and Snape. It might have been only seconds, or half an hour might have passed before Harry turned to Snape and held out his wand. Snape just stared at it for a moment before snatching it back. He held it in his hands in disbelief.

"Why did you do that, Potter?"

"Because you didn't believe it wasn't murder."

"What on earth are you attempting to articulate with that addled teenaged brain?"

"You didn't want to kill him. You thought it was murder. You shouldn't have had to do it if you didn't believe it was the right thing to do. So I did it. I used your wand because I know Voldemort will check. I guess Madam Pomfrey knows to destroy those records of illness if Voldemort wants it publicly known that you murdered Dumbledore?"

Snape was nearly livid. "You thought to spare me?" he asked with an incredulous sneer. "You did this because you wanted to help me?"

Harry shrugged. He was hardly able to get angry or get into Professor Snape's face at this point. He hadn't entirely absorbed the enormity of what he'd done. He wasn't sure yet that he would ever entirely get his head around this, but he felt quite certain that it was right, whether overwhelming or not.

"Is it so hard to believe?" Harry muttered.

"You have placed me in your debt," Professor Snape bit out.

Harry gave him a sharp look. "No, I haven't. That's not what this was about. This was about Dumbledore."

"I am well aware of that, Potter! If you hadn't done it on his behalf, it wouldn't have worked! Nevertheless, you have also done something for me that . . ."

It was a truly rare thing to see Professor Snape at a loss for words. And Harry couldn't take it anymore. He had nothing left to give, this night.

"I'm going home to Sirius," he muttered. "If anyone's looking for me, that's where I'll be."

He trudged down the stairs and collided with someone coming up. Stunned and feeling lost under the weight of his actions, it took him a moment to realise that the collision had taken place, and with whom.

"Draco?"

"Excuse me, Potter."

Harry felt utter panic at the thought of allowing the blond boy past him to see Professor Snape staring at the body of their headmaster. "You can't go up," he said firmly, wondering how on earth he was going to explain this.

Draco looked frightened. He always looked frightened these days, but tonight it seemed to go deeper and be causing him pain.

"You have to let me by," he said, and tried to push past Harry. But Harry was far the stronger of the two, especially with how fragilely thin Draco had become this year. He barred the way up.

"I'm sorry, Draco. You can't go up there."

"I have to see the headmaster," Draco insisted. "Now. If he's busy—but I know he'll see me. I need . . . never mind, Potter, just let me up!"

"Draco, what do you need?"

"It isn't your business, Potter. Move!" he cried desperately, and Harry was shocked to see tears forming in his eyes.

"You really need Dumbledore, not just 'the headmaster,' am I right?" Harry asked slowly.

Draco was furious. "They're the same person, Potter, don't be so ridiculous."

"No, they aren't," Harry said slowly. "Not anymore."

Draco was understandably confused by that. "I don't know what you're on about, but I want to see him immediately!"

"You can't. I'm sorry. He's not there to see."

"What is that supposed to mean? Where has he gone?"

Dry-eyed and dull, Harry answered. "He's dead, Draco."

Draco's face slowly crumpled, and he grabbed at the wall for support. "Dead? But he can't be dead. I need his help."

"I know," Harry said, and felt even more exhausted. He had nothing left to give, but it seemed that something was being required of him all the same. This fell to him, for the moment. Just now, there was no one else. "Tell me."

Draco shook his head violently. "Not you. I don't want your help."

"I'm all there is, until this is sorted out."

"No," Draco said feebly, and backed down a few steps.

"Draco, don't be stupid. I know he's not here, but you said you need help right now. What can I do?"

Draco seemed to be caving in on himself. "I found a way to get the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. I figured it out weeks ago. There's this cupboard . . . I should be doing it right now. But I can't. I don't wish to do it. I'm his slave, don't you see? I never had any desire to be a slave. I was supposed to be great, but I'm not anything to him. I won't do what he wants. I won't."

"You need protection," Harry guessed.

"Not just me. My mother. I needed Dumbledore to help my mother."

"The Order will do it."

"The what?"

"Never mind, Draco. I'm going to take care of it, I promise you. If you sent a message to your mother to tell her to meet you without telling your father, would she do it?"

"Yes," Draco muttered.

"How can we get a message to her without your father finding out?"

“House elf.”

“We’ll send mine, then. I’m kind of trusting that your father won’t immediately notice that an elf might not be his?”

“It’s possible.”

“Okay. Come with me.”

Harry couldn’t face what waited at the top of the stairs, and he couldn’t let Draco see it. He took him to Sirius’ office and they Flooed to Grimmauld Place from there. Sirius had returned from the werewolf compound and was extremely surprised to have the two boys pop up in the study where he was going over tomorrow’s lesson plan.

“Harry, what’s happening?” he asked, standing. It was obvious that things were not normal.

“I need to use Kreacher. Kreacher!”

The house elf appeared. “Yes, young master. I see that you have brought the most noble pure-blooded son of mistress Narcissa. Kreacher thinks it is very fine to have a boy of outstanding blood in this house again . . .”

“That’s really excellent, Kreacher,” Harry said, the strain in his voice making the elf shut up. “I need you to do something for this very fine specimen of pureblood tradition, in fact. I need you to go to the Malfoy house and give a message to mistress Narcissa. Only mistress Narcissa, yeah? Can you do that?”

Kreacher drew himself up, looking haughty. “Kreacher can be entrusted with secret messages, of course he can, he—”

“That’s wonderful,” Harry said indulgently. “Draco, tell Kreacher the message.”

“Tell her that her son needs her to immediately come to, er—”

“Hogwarts,” Harry supplied. “She needs to meet you at the school.”

“Right, because I don’t know where we are. She should meet me at the school,” Draco repeated.

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Harry said brusquely. “Please come back here as soon as you have delivered the message, that is, as soon as you can without letting anyone besides mistress Narcissa know you are there.”

“Kreacher is proud to serve,” the house elf said soberly, and disappeared with a crack.

Draco gave Harry a bewildered look. “Are we going back to the school now?”

“No,” Harry answered. He turned to Sirius, who stood there with patience, awaiting Harry’s explanation. “Sirius, will you go there to meet her?”

Sirius scowled.

“She’s your cousin, and she’s about to be in danger,” Harry said sharply.

“About to be? Why?”

“Draco’s defecting,” Harry shrugged. “He’s staying here, since they’ll kill him first. You’ll go get his mother.”

Sirius clenched his jaw. “Are they supposed to stay here?”

“I don’t know yet. What about Tonks’ mum? When was the last time you talked to her? Do you think she’d hide her sister and nephew?”

Sirius was getting the first inklings that something was wrong, more than Harry was saying. “What has Dumbledore said?”

Harry nearly screamed. Instead, he choked it back and grabbed Sirius by the arms. “Sirius, listen to me. Just do this. It needs to be

done right now, and Dumbledore can't do it. I'll tell you later, but right now, please just go."

Sirius took in the ravaged expression on Harry's face, the stiffness of his posture, and decided to simply trust him. He grabbed Harry into a quick hug and said the only thing that seemed right under the circumstances.

"I love you."

He ducked into the fireplace and disappeared. Harry dropped into an armchair and closed his eyes, trying to remember how this whole breathing thing was supposed to work. It wasn't fair, he told the universe or whoever was listening. Not fair at all, to put this on him now, tonight. Why did Draco have to show up now?

Draco cleared his throat.

Harry opened his eyes. "What?" he hissed.

"I just . . . what happened? How did he die?"

Harry glared at Draco. "None of your concern, I'd say. You'll find out eventually. Right now, I'd be more worried that your mother and Sirius are going to kill each other before they can get back here."

Draco began to pace the room. "I didn't want it to be you," he muttered.

"Tough shit," Harry snapped. "I'm what you've got."

Draco gave him a cold look. "I'm aware of that, Potter. And I've obviously lost any pride I might have had, since I appear to be taking help from you."

Harry tried very, very hard to imagine what this was like for Draco. He didn't have any way of knowing what had taken place just before his arrival, so he didn't know that Harry was literally inches away from some kind of psychotic episode. He had swallowed enough of his pride by coming to Dumbledore, and it must be infinitely worse to

have his hopes snatched away and be forced to take the poor replacement Harry held out to him.

“Draco . . . for what it’s worth, I don’t think there’s any loss of pride in taking help when you need it. Obviously this is something you couldn’t do alone. I’m sorry that it had to be me, okay? I’m sorry.”

Harry knew he needed to shut his mouth before random things Draco didn’t need to know started spilling out of it. Draco was looking at him like he was bonkers already.

“Whatever, Potter,” Draco mumbled, and sat down where Sirius had been sitting.

“Thank you,” Harry said, giving him the most earnest look he could manage. “You’re doing the right thing, Draco. I can’t pretend to know why you’re doing it, but I am really glad you are. You could be killing a lot of people right now, and you aren’t. Any shame you might be feeling over taking my help is totally cancelled out by that.”

Draco began to sneer, so Harry headed off his attitude.

“Besides, I’ve had a rough night. I’m just glad I don’t have to spend half my night kicking Death Eater arse on top of it.”

“He’s really dead, isn’t he?” Draco said, like he hadn’t quite believed it before.

Harry jumped up out of his seat. “I need something to drink. You want something?”

Draco shrugged, and stood up to follow him to the kitchen. Harry was heading that way, but then he stopped, turned around, and went to the corner of the study, instead. He opened a cabinet, withdrew a mostly-full bottle of Sirius’ favourite whiskey, and poured himself a generous helping into one of the four glasses also kept in the cabinet. He threw it down, gasped, and poured another. He held up the bottle and raised his eyebrows at Draco. The boy gaped at him, then shrugged and held out another glass.

Kreacher appeared while Harry was pouring, making both boys jump in surprise.

“You saw my mother?” Draco blurted out.

Kreacher bowed low. “Kreacher has delivered the message. It took him time to leave without being noticed, but Kreacher is a good elf who obeys all orders.”

“Thanks, Kreacher,” Harry said. “You’ve done good work. Would you mind preparing a room for mistress Narcissa to stay in tonight?”

“Kreacher lives to serve the noble House of Black,” was the elf’s answer, and to Harry’s relief, he went to work and left them alone.

Draco was still nursing his first glass along when Sirius arrived with his mother, but Harry was already on his third. They had remained in strained silence since Harry got out the whiskey. It had taken longer than it should have, but only because Sirius had had to convince his cousin to follow him and assure him that her son was safe, all without having a clue what was going on.

“Draco!” Narcissa gasped out, and smothered him in hugs and kisses, tears on her cheeks. “I was so afraid!”

Harry looked at the pair with dull eyes. Draco looked more like his mother than Harry would have believed, but he had no particular thoughts about it. He didn’t really care about anything.

“Listen,” Sirius said, using a firm and commanding voice. “You can stay here tonight, and we’ll work out a plan tomorrow. I think we ought to call Andy, personally, but we’ll talk about it in the morning. I don’t know what’s going on, exactly, but I gather that the two of you shouldn’t be seen or located by the Death Eaters. Again, something we can work out in the morning. For now, you can use the bedroom at the end of the hall on the second floor. Kreacher will get you anything you need.”

“You really don’t think we ought to talk about any of this tonight?” Narcissa asked in disbelief.

"I would love to, but I need to speak to Harry privately right now," Sirius said serenely. "I'm sure you understand. Good night."

Summarily dismissed, the uninvited houseguests retired with whatever aplomb they could muster. Sirius turned to Harry.

"I tried to see Dumbledore before Narcissa got there, but I couldn't get in. The entrance has been sealed off or something. What in blazes is going on, Harry?"

"He's dead," Harry told his glass of whiskey.

"What? Who's dead?"

"Dumbledore is."

"Didn't you just see him a few hours ago? How could Dumbledore possibly be dead?"

"Because I killed him," Harry replied calmly.

"Harry, this isn't funny."

"No, it isn't. The Horcrux we went to get yesterday was a fake, and Dumbledore just suddenly got overwhelmed by the curse and he was fading really fast. He wanted Professor Snape to do it, you know, to just ease his passage, because if Snape did it, he could tell Voldemort that he killed Dumbledore. But Snape didn't want to do it, so I took his wand and I did it for him."

"You . . . did it."

"Yes, Sirius," Harry said in agitation. "I held a wizard's wand in my hand and spoke the words Avada Kedavra with the intent to kill. I killed Dumbledore. I did it because he wanted me to and because he was in a lot of pain. I killed him."

He took several long pulls of whiskey directly from the bottle and stood up.

"I think I'm going to bed now. There's going to be a lot to do in the morning."

"Harry," Sirius said helplessly. "I don't know what to say."

"Goodnight will do fine."

The bottle of whiskey was snatched out of his hand and Sirius set it down on the mantle over the fireplace with a loud clank.

"I cannot believe that all this is going on right now and you're sitting here getting drunk and getting an attitude with me. Talk to me, Harry. Are you being serious? This is the truth? Dumbledore is dead, you helped him die, Snape is going to claim he did it, and meanwhile two-thirds of the Malfoy family is holed up in my house?"

"That's pretty much the gist of it," Harry said wearily. "But you forgot the part about how the Horcrux is a fake."

"Oh, let's not forget that. I knew there was some inevitable shitstorm brewing, but Merlin's balls, this is the big one. Fuck me."

"Sirius, can I have the whiskey back? I'm not nearly drunk enough yet."

Sirius raked his hands through his hair. "Harry, is that really what you want to do?"

"Yes. I don't know." His voice cracked and he stopped talking. He had to get out of there, because he was going to lose it any second and he had to be alone, had to—

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry, kiddo," Sirius said gently, reaching out his arms.

Harry fell into them with a groan of pure pain. He didn't cry. He allowed his godfather to keep him from flying into tiny pieces while he tried to take into himself what he'd done. He blacked out and didn't

remember anything after being drawn into that embrace. When he awoke in the morning, he was still in Sirius' arms on the parlour floor.

Chapter Eleven

There were a lot of people at the funeral. Harry had thought that Dumbledore's sharp drop in popularity would lead to a poor attendance, but he had underestimated the power of hypocrisy. The funeral was held at the school, as they were all certain Dumbledore would have wanted—but Harry noticed that the respect for his supposed wishes only went so far. He was certain that his mentor would have preferred something smaller and less stately, with simple words spoken by someone he was close to.

If we did it that way, it'd be me or Professor Snape up there, he reminded himself, and that wouldn't be the best idea. The chaos surrounding both of them . . . no, better to stay off the stage until things settled a bit. Professor Snape was, tactfully and wisely, not present at the ceremony. There were just enough rumours that he murdered Dumbledore to raise a public outcry, yet not enough evidence to legally condemn him. And Madam Pomfrey's records might all be in order, but she had inexplicably lost all memory of putting them together, as well as all memory of the treatments they detailed, as well as any certainty of whether he had been sick or had been killed. Quite the tangle.

In Harry's case, it was purely political. Was he going to be their next white knight? Already they were out for Cornelius Fudge's blood. It was hilarious to Harry. After all the Minister's bungling inefficiency, they were after him for something that was none of his business and which he could have done nothing to prevent? He had never been more certain of how much he hated politics than he was at Dumbledore's funeral.

Especially with the speculative eyes being cast in Sirius' direction. Harry might be their Galahad, but Sirius was older, more experienced, and they were looking for a leader. Yet Harry didn't worry too much about Sirius getting held up on a pedestal, despite the way he saw them looking at his godfather. Sirius was too much of a fringe candidate. He'd been a rogue for too long—a criminal, an exile, and now too firmly entrenched on the side of the werewolves in the civil rights debate.

He didn't realise how deeply he'd sunk into his thoughts until Hermione touched his shoulder and he nearly threw her on the ground and choked her. He took a quick step back while he got control of his reflexes, and mustered up a dry smile at her stunned look.

"Sorry."

"It's okay," she said gently, but she was frowning. "Can we talk later?"

Harry sighed to make his frustration plain. He hadn't yet told her the story of Dumbledore's death, not his part in it nor why it had happened. She was aware that he knew the truth, but he'd begged for a little time before he had to explain it. In truth, he wasn't sure if he had the right to tell her. It was bad enough for Snape, to know that Harry held the professor's life in his hands, but the added tension of having Sirius and then Hermione take a share of that responsibility might be too much.

"I don't know," Harry answered her. He looked around at all the people clamouring for one another's attention or trying to get to him, while the students and professors that were in attendance were weeping quietly or clinging together in small groups. It was an ugly sight. "I have to get out of here."

Hermione frowned in concern. "Okay. Do you want to go inside?"

"No," he said, turning away with a feeling of sickness in his gut. "I need to get away from all of this. I can't stand it."

"Let's go to your house, then," she suggested, taking hold of his arm.

Harry didn't think that was far enough, but it was the only place he could go. "Fine, I guess."

"Well, where do you want to go?" she asked with admirable patience.

"Away," he whispered. "I want to leave."

"Oh, Harry," she whispered back, her eyes sad. "I wish you could."

They found Sirius and told him they were going. Sirius said okay, but with a longing expression that clearly said he wished he could join them. As teenagers, it seemed, less was expected of them. But for an adult, private retreat into grief was unseemly. Sirius, with Remus and Tonks there to protect him from anyone unwelcome, would have to stay awhile longer. He was mostly sticking with Hagrid, who was absolutely undone, and Hagrid's half-brother, the semi-civilised Grawp, who needed to be watched closely while Hagrid was grieving. Harry wished he'd gotten closer to Hagrid so he could join the others and close ranks against the world to mourn Dumbledore's passing. But he'd been so busy that he'd barely had time to get to know his own roommates. He'd never even met Grawp before, although by the looks of things that was no great loss.

Then he had an idea.

"Hermione?"

"What?"

"Would you be very upset if I wanted to go somewhere without you?"

This was their new policy. If he asked a question like that, he expected an honest answer. And vice versa.

"I don't think I'd be upset, but I would feel a little hurt," she said slowly, drawing herself away from him. "But that's only because I don't understand what is going on in your head right now. I know you have a good reason for not talking to me, but I do feel hurt by it. I don't want you to avoid me."

"It's not that," he said hastily, taking her hand and clutching it hard. "It's just that the place I want to go is one you couldn't follow me to." She squeezed his hand until it hurt. "How long will you be gone?"

"Just a few hours. I promise. I'll come find you after."

She nodded slowly, but she was crying. "Don't run away, Harry. Please don't run away. At least not from me."

He gave her fingers a soft kiss before releasing them. "I won't."

She nodded, and he left her. She would be okay for a few hours. She, too, was sad about this tragedy, and there would be some in the crowd who might need her comfort almost as much as Harry did. Harry was tired of wizards and funerals, and he needed to go away from it as far as he could for a while.

"Mr. Potter?"

He groaned aloud. He'd almost gotten away. He turned around, and his face softened only a little at seeing the twenty-something brunette again. She was here in a professional capacity, and he knew what she wanted.

"Miss Garnet. What can I do for you?"

She was standing there with a page to take notes on and a quill in her hand, and she'd obviously already taken down quite a few notes, judging by the slightly crumpled papers sticking out the pockets of her robes. She had to be the least organized reporter in the world, although that was one of the reasons Harry had liked her.

"I was hoping to ask you a couple of questions, but . . ." She shook her head, and her face had that look of sympathy she'd worn so often during their first interview. "Let's make a deal, Mr. Potter."

"Okay," he said warily.

"I will leave you alone, as I can see you need it. I will even cover your tracks so no one else will know you've gone for as long as I can. In return, I get an exclusive interview tomorrow."

"You'd really do that?"

"It will have more of an impact if I publish in two days," she said with a little shrug. "Everyone else will have their reports about the funeral tomorrow."

Harry couldn't conjure up a smile, but he tried. "You're not like any reporter I've ever met, Miss Garnet. And I really like having a friend in the press."

"So you'll do it?"

He shook his head. "I'm not going to have the time or the inclination for a full interview tomorrow, but I will answer a couple of questions now. Make it quick, Miss Garnet."

Looking surprised, she turned to her notes and muttered to herself for a moment, then abruptly shoved them in her pocket. "I don't know why I write questions ahead of time," she confessed. "I always think of new ones once I get to start asking them."

Harry wished he had enough patience for her today, because he really did like having a friend in the press, but he had to get out of here. "If you have nothing for me . . ."

"I do. Would I be wasting my time to ask you what you know about Dumbledore's death?"

Harry gave her a cold look.

"Thought so. Okay, then, nothing about that. I do want to ask you about Dumbledore, though. I've heard several accounts that the two of you spent a lot of time together. Why?"

"I was there to learn," Harry said slowly. "And he wanted someone to teach."

"What did you learn about?"

"Some of everything. Albus Dumbledore had acquired more information and more wisdom over his life than I could ever hope to, and I was honoured that he chose to share any of it with me. We talked about politics, ethics, history, transfiguration theory, the culture of magical creatures . . . as I said, some of everything. He was a brilliant man, and I am a much better person for having known him."

“Tell me the thing you most admired about him, Harry.”

Harry shook his head, stumped. Out of everything, what would he say? But he knew what he really missed about Dumbledore. “He had this ability, as everyone who’s ever talked to him would tell you, of making people trust him. As soon as I met him, I wanted to learn this trick. There was something in the way he spoke to you that made you believe he respected you and appreciated you, so that you would feel comfortable and you would tell him anything. I always wanted to know how he pulled that off. It’s only been since he died that I finally figured out his trick of making people believe he cared about them and valued their opinion.”

He stopped, because he was realising the best thing about Dumbledore only now and it shamed him.

“What was it?” she prompted.

“There was no trick,” Harry whispered. “He did.” He started walking again. “Good luck with your article, Miss Garnet.”

She let him go, probably happy enough that she was the only reporter he’d spoken to. Or, from the way she was standing there, maybe she was just as impressed by Harry’s realization as he was.

Harry was relieved beyond words that there was no one near the lake that he needed to hide from. He and Reed had cultivated a tiny patch of gillyweed just a few feet from the shore’s edge, by the tree where they used to meet, and Harry went there and downed a mouthful of the nasty stuff as quickly as possible. While he chewed, he took off his dark robes and set them in a fork of the tree’s branches. He set his shoes atop the robes, swallowed the gillyweed, and dove into the lake.

It was a bright, sunny day on the surface, and the light managed to penetrate fairly deep. Harry didn’t have his arm holster for his wand, so he simply carried it in one hand while he swam. The water was warm enough for the grindylows to be lively, and he’d rather not get attacked by them. He was a little worried about his reception at the bottom of the lake. This was the first time he’d shown up on his own,

without invitation or appointment. The serious ways and commitment to tradition of the merfolk might mean he got sent on his way.

But Pesca saw him coming and had already fetched Reed by the time Harry arrived in the village.

“Harry,” Reed said soberly. “We have heard of Dumbledore’s death. We do not mourn the loss of this friend to our people, because he gifted us with another friend before he moved to the next world. Yet we will sing for a unique character who will no longer be shared with our people. Have you come to sing with us, Harry?”

He was safe here, among this tiny community that accepted him. And they were inviting him to express his grief, with no fear of creating the wrong public image. He could have kissed Reed.

“I have come to sing with you,” Harry answered. “Though I do not know your song.”

Reed smiled a bit, a brief flash of mossy teeth. “We have sung it together, Harry.”

The only song Harry could remember singing down here was a beautiful little chant, almost a hymn, that was an expression of joy for their gifts of good water and bounty here in the lake, and their desire to pass the gifts to a new generation. He frowned questioningly.

“We do not mourn the dead, Harry. We invite them to sing their thanks with us, as they move ahead and leave the gifts of our people to the next generation.”

So Harry joined them as they gathered in their meeting place, and as Reed invited whatever remained of Dumbledore’s spirit to sing with them. Then he sang with them, expressing joy at their good life and his acceptance that someday he would pass this joy along and leave it behind for another. There were no reporters, and no one cried. Harry much preferred Dumbledore’s second funeral.

The crowds had gone, although there were still a few mourners who had stayed to pay their last respects in privacy. It was beginning to

get dark, and a grayness had fallen over the sky, and the day was becoming cool.

Neville was in a cold, dark place of his own, as the sky slowly changed to match it. He stood in front of the white tomb, numb with disbelief more than with grief. Albus had told him that he was ill and that he was getting old. He'd said that he didn't have much time left in the world. But he'd made Neville believe (or maybe Neville had chosen to believe) that this was still years away, not a mere few months.

It had come without warning. One day, Neville had his adopted grandfather in his life, there to listen to him or give him advice and to inspire him. The next day, he was not there. It was like waking up one morning and finding out your home had been robbed. That while you slept, someone had crept in and taken your most valuable possessions from your bedside table, right there by your head. Neville felt that sense of violation on top of his loss.

His problem was that he didn't know who the thief was. It might be Professor Snape, despite the mess caused by lack of evidence and his public denial of doing any such thing. Or it might have been some creeping illness who had stolen Albus from him. But the real feeling of violation came when he looked at Harry Potter. Because Harry knew something. He said he didn't, but he lied. People who didn't know him might not be able to tell, but Neville could tell that he lied.

He wasn't sure if he was angry with Harry. He wasn't quite sure of anything concerning his emotions, at the moment. As best he could tell, he didn't have any. He just felt so awfully cold and alone. Like he was floating in a strange cold pool, insulated from all attempts to reach him. Even the sounds of voices were oddly muffled and came to him from a greater distance than they should. He was alone, here in the cold place. He'd finally started calling the headmaster Albus because they needed something personal and calling him Grandpa wasn't right at all, and after such a brief time of sharing that new familial closeness, he was gone.

Neville leaned against the white stone. It was warm from soaking up the sun's rays, and Neville tried to let the warmth get into him, but it

wouldn't come. At least not right away. But after a moment, it came to him from a new source. Fawkes came and alighted on his shoulder. The phoenix was not a true pet, and it did not allow itself to be pampered or stroked, but he settled on Neville shoulder and rubbed his head against Neville's cheek. He hooted softly.

Neville reached up and carefully put a hand on the bird's side, feeling the heavy weight of Fawkes' warm body and welcoming it. "He left you alone, too, didn't he?"

Phoenix tears could not heal all wounds, so the two of them sat without trying to heal anything for a few minutes. Then Neville heard footsteps approaching him. Thinking it would be one of the professors coming to tell him to go inside, he didn't look up. He wasn't ready to leave yet. Instead, someone sat down beside him, and he turned to see that it was Luna Lovegood.

"Hello, Luna," he said cautiously.

"Hello, Neville," she replied. She didn't say anything else.

"Did you want something?"

"I had come over to tell you something, actually."

"Okay. Go ahead."

"Well, it seems silly now. I came to tell you that the people we love never leave us, not entirely. But now you already know," she said, gesturing to Fawkes. "So I decided not to say anything. But I was already here, so I sat down. I thought you might like to sit by someone who wasn't going to bother you."

Neville made himself smile. "Thank you, Luna."

They sat in silence for several minutes. Neville didn't feel the least bit uncomfortable. He knew Luna well enough by now, after so long in the DL together, and for all his grief, he did appreciate her gesture. He hadn't thought he would have anybody to talk to, nobody who would understand what he was feeling—except maybe Harry, and

Harry was obviously not planning on talking to him. But Neville found he didn't need someone who could understand, not really.

"I miss him already," Neville said softly.

"It will get better. It will take a long time, though."

Now Neville recalled that Luna had lost her mother when she was a child. Maybe she knew how he felt better than he'd thought.

"It's more than just how close we were," Neville said. "He was a good headmaster. I don't know who will take his place, but they won't do it like he did."

"That doesn't have to be a bad thing."

"Maybe not. But now we don't have a leader for this war."

Luna blinked at him, long pale lashes sweeping over her huge eyes and making her look strangely innocent. "We don't?"

"Not like him."

"But we have Harry, and we have you."

"I'm not the Boy-Who-Lived."

"But I thought you both were," she said, seeming to be genuinely confused.

Neville shook his head, ready to explain, then thought the better of it. If she didn't already know, he wasn't sure she ever would. He'd known she was odd, but he hadn't expected her to miss the point so completely.

"Is there some kind of rule that says you can't both be that?" Luna asked. "I thought you were both going to fight You-Know-Who."

"We are."

“Well, then,” she said, as though she had made some point and was satisfied.

“But nobody is looking at me to be the leader now.”

“That’s not true,” she said softly. “You’re the leader of the DL. You aren’t going to quit, are you? We still want you to be our leader.”

Neville hadn’t thought about that. “We’re just students. How much of a difference are we going to make?”

“I don’t know, of course. Would you like me to ask a Seer?”

Neville almost had to laugh, mostly because she seemed to be entirely serious. “No, I don’t think they’d be able to tell us. But you’re right, I guess. I do still have a lot to do. Who knows what the DL might be able to do? And our side needs everyone it can get, anyway. No, Luna, I’m not going to quit.”

“Good,” she said, and got to her feet. “You see? Dumbledore will never leave you entirely.”

Neville watched her walk away, feeling amazed. He hadn’t known she had so much depth behind all her eccentricities. It seemed like she’d come over here to give him some hope. Neville thought of his roommates and his fellow prefects, who had come to him throughout the day to offer him a brief word or embrace, and how nothing had made a difference, nothing had broken through the fog he was in. Luna had somehow done it.

He pulled something out of his pocket, something that never left his pocket no matter how many other items had gone missing from his person over the years. Pens, coins, trinkets—they all tended to disappear from his robes and trousers. But not this. He tapped his wand to the Galleon and set the time for the next meeting. Half an hour, and the DL would gather in the Room of Requirement. He had to speak to them.

He stood up, causing Fawkes to take flight briefly to avoid losing balance. The phoenix hooted questioningly.

"You don't have to stay," Neville said quietly. "I know you don't have a reason to anymore. I'll be okay without you."

Fawkes let loose a high, keening cry that made Neville's heart ache for something he couldn't explain. Then he was gone.

Neville hurried to the seventh floor. His friends were already arriving, looking confused, and Neville felt a burst of gratitude. He wasn't alone, not at all.

"Neville, what's going on?" Hannah asked him anxiously, grabbing hold of his arm.

"I'll tell you when everyone gets here."

"You've got us pretty worried, mate," Ron said, putting his arm protectively around Parvati, whose eyes were still red from crying.

"Hope you aren't going to do anything stupid," Ernie remarked. "I would hate to have to stop you."

Neville shook his head. "Nothing like that. Thanks for coming, guys."

"We knew it had to be important, for you to be calling a meeting right now."

They were good friends, all of them. Ginny and Dean were there in only moments, and Seamus arrived with all the younger students from Gryffindor after only a few minutes. Luna came in on her own, beaming a smile at Neville as though she were proud of him. Most of the Ravenclaw students showed up shortly thereafter. Cho was absent, but since Cedric Diggory had come to the funeral with her they didn't wonder where she was. Neville was amazed at how many members of the DL had come.

Hermione came in alone, and Neville hurried over to her before anyone else could.

"Is he coming?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "I'm not sure where he went."

Neville felt annoyed and angry with Harry again. He was acting like he'd lost more than Neville had, or something. He wasn't dealing with this very well, retreating more than ever and acting like things didn't still need to be done.

"Neville, we're all about to bloody lose our minds," Ginny said loudly.

The milling students immediately became quieter and looked at Neville.

"Okay. I just called you here to say one thing, that's all. I don't mean to waste your time or anything, but it needs to be said."

"We're all here, aren't we?" Seamus said. "Let's have it."

Neville took a deep breath. "We're getting very close to the end of the school year. I'm sure that this year will be finished as normally as possible, but I don't think any of us are expecting it to be the same next year. We're going to have a new headmaster. I don't know who that will be—maybe Professor McGonagall, but maybe not. We all know the Board of Directors is in Lucius Malfoy's pocket, so anything could happen. If that worries you, it's not because you're paranoid. It worries me, as well. The only thing we can know for certain is that Hogwarts will be different this autumn."

"We know that, Neville," Hannah said quietly.

He nodded. "So this is my point: we have to be ready for it. All of us. We need to stick together. We've been working together for this long already, and I don't want that to change. I know that not having Dumbledore is pretty scary, when we think about the war, and what the real goal of the DL has always been. But I say that means the DL is more important now than it ever was. We can't—" He was getting choked up. "We can't stop fighting." He paused, taking a deep breath.

Hannah put a hand on his shoulder. "We know that you and the headmaster were very close, Neville. No one is expecting you to be ready for this right now."

"Thanks," he whispered, but he stood up straight and addressed the group again. "What we've lost is more than just our headmaster, obviously. But we won't let that destroy what we've been working for. I don't know what the DL can do, but we're going to find out. Even if the resistance falls apart without Voldemort, even if the DL is all that's left, we're going to keep fighting. I, for one, will be here every week next year, preparing myself to do whatever is necessary to put a stop to You-Know-Who. Who is going to be here with me?"

Everyone stared at him.

"I will," said one voice, bold and loud. It was Kimberly Kearney. She took a step forward to look Neville in the eyes. She looked beautiful, standing there with her fists clenched and her face shining with determination, like some sort of warrior queen. Colin Creevey stepped up beside her, his cherubic blond curls glowing like a halo and making him look like an avenging angel-in-training rather than a child.

"And me."

The two of them smiled at one another and Colin put his hand around Kimberly's, and then suddenly the whole DL was clamouring their agreement and shouting that they would be here and that they would fight. Ernie and Ron and Ginny and Parvati and Hannah were standing around him, patting his shoulders and pledging their support. There were people thumping their comrades on the back, and gripping their wands, and the power of the feelings in the room was so thick that it set Neville's heart to pounding.

Then Hermione slipped in close to him. While everyone was shouting, she put her face close to his and whispered.

"I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know if Harry or I will be here for the DL. But I know that Dumbledore would be proud of you if he could see you now. Don't give up, Neville."

She slipped away from him. Neville didn't see her leave, but he didn't see her at all after that, so he supposed she must have left to find Harry. He was a little bit lost at the idea. Harry provided so much strength to their group with his own hard work and with his ideals, while Hermione was their most brilliant witch and the one who could find the answer when no one else could. Neville didn't know how to fill in that gap, so he could only hope that they would still be around.

"The confusion you have created suits me perfectly."

The silken voice came to him from far away, and the split second it took him to respond could get him killed. He had to focus.

"I had hoped you would be pleased, my lord," he answered. His face was implacable, with only a small, humble smile to the dark-robed figure seated across from him.

"You have given us many more options than I had planned for," the Dark Lord continued, his eyes displaying a mad glee. "Our attempts to gain control in the Ministry are not going as well as I had hoped, so I would not have been able to cover up your murder if you had been more obvious."

He bowed his head. "I have tried my best to ensure that it cannot be proven. I have given you my wand to ensure that it does not fall to those who would use it to discover the murder."

The long, bony fingers stroked that wand, which sat on the table beside him. He had taken great pleasure in causing the wand to reveal its last spell over and over, watching Dumbledore die as many times as he wished. Severus had acquired a second wand over a year ago and used it in his classroom and brewing experiments many times so that he had one to present to the Ministry. He would be using that one from now on, but he missed the one the Dark Lord held. It was his true wand.

"You have done me a great service," the Dark Lord smiled. "I will not forget your loyalty to me."

"You are generous, my lord," he murmured.

"I know that you must go, to cover your tracks, but first I will tell you my plan."

"Yes, master."

"You will replace him."

"Whom?"

"Do not pretend ignorance, Severus, it does not become you. You will be headmaster of Hogwarts next term."

"Do you believe we have the power for that already?"

The Dark Lord smiled again, his little burst of temper already forgotten. "The school's board of directors will do as I wish them to do, and I wish them to place you in that role. Under your guidance, the school will become what it should be. We will eradicate the Mudblood vermin that currently scurry in its halls, and make it pure. You will do this for me, Severus."

"I will be proud to serve you, master. I am eager to begin."

"I know you are," he nearly purred. "Now go. You have work to do to ensure that your peers cannot try to take your place, and I know that you must take steps toward pretending that you had nothing to do with the death of Albus Dumbledore. I know you are anxious to help Lucius locate his family, but rest assured that we are giving proper attention to that."

"Of course. You have only to tell me if help is needed and I will be glad to give it my attention. Until then, I have other work to attend in your service."

"Then you are dismissed."

"Thank you, my lord."

He left quickly. It did not do to linger in the Dark Lord's presence, not even for those who served him. Bellatrix Lestrange was the only person he knew who truly relished the company. Everyone served him and his ideals, but Severus could easily pick out in their minds their moments of distaste for their master. He pointed it out when it would bring him more favour and kept silent when it would not. He was a good servant to the Dark Lord, and he could only become a better servant from now on. It was as Dumbledore had said—he had taken the final step in their plan. Dumbledore was gone and his own loyalty was demanded by only one master now. Yet it was, if anything, even more difficult now. He did not have Dumbledore to remind him of his true path. He would have to remember it on his own.

Of course, it was hard to forget that the person he currently served had killed the only woman he had ever loved. And that the same person had demanded he kill the only man who had ever believed in him. He burned with the desire to have his vengeance for that. But it would have to wait, for a while. He would know when it was time. Dumbledore had been very clear. Harry Potter was the one who would tell him when it was time.

He had just begun the darkest part of his life, and he found himself lacking the belief that he would see the end of it. He could recite his plan, but somehow he didn't know what would happen. It was time to give up hope, he admitted, if he'd ever had any to begin with. He had nothing left to hope for, except his revenge. Potter had better do his part quickly. Severus was ready for this to be over. He wanted to end this, and he wanted to leave. Once this was over, he would never come back.

Chapter Twelve

“Thanks for coming.”

The anxious young man let out a breathy laugh of disbelief. “Am I supposed to believe that I had a choice of some kind?”

Harry gave Draco an impassable face, to indicate that he did not have the time or energy for a tiff. It must have gone awry somewhere between his intention and Draco’s understanding, because his sharp features went pale and he shut his mouth. Apparently, Harry had finally managed to intimidate the little git.

“Let’s get one thing straight from the beginning,” Harry said, eager to get this meeting he’d requested out of the way. “You came to us for help. Which, strangely enough, seems to indicate you did make a choice.”

Draco leaned back in his chair, posturing himself into an elegant sprawl, and looked up as though supplicating some deity to spare him from this.

“I’m regretting it more with every passing minute,” he said to the ceiling of Grimmauld Place’s parlour. “Potter, would you care to explain why on earth I’m here?”

“Don’t act as if you don’t know,” Harry said harshly. “It’s been a week already, and I need to get things settled with you.”

“Fine. You can start by telling me what you know about Dumbledore.”

The lazy drawl of his voice was nothing short of infuriating, but Harry’s temper was carefully in check. His emotions still seemed to spiral out of control at a moment’s notice, so he was watching himself. (He was beginning to get the feeling that his struggle for control was actually a connection to Voldemort, who was absolutely giddy about Dumbledore’s death and the fact that Fudge was going to be stepping down from the role of Minister in a matter of days.)

"It is as I've already told you, and as I've already told the entire world. I went up to his office to speak with him, and all I found was his body, in his chair, at his desk. I don't know anything more than that."

"Which you have not yet proven with Veritaserum," Draco noted.

"Which is because I am not a suspect and they didn't ask me to," Harry said reasonably, as if to say he would certainly submit to Veritaserum if it was suggested. As if to say that the very notion didn't make his heart race. "And I've had enough of this. You are not in a position to negotiate, if you hadn't noticed."

Draco remained in his sprawl and his face continued to reflect simple boredom, but Harry could sense the speeding up of his thoughts that indicated he'd touched a nerve. "I repeat, Potter, why am I here?"

"To tell me why."

"Why what, exactly?"

"Why you chose to come to our side for help. Why you willingly chose exile and hiding for yourself and your mother. What made you reveal the weak point in our security so it could be dealt with. I need to know why."

"I was raised to have impeccable manners," Draco said slowly.

Harry snorted.

"But somehow the only response that seems appropriate, despite all the polite phrases in my repertoire, is: go fuck yourself, Potter."

Harry didn't allow himself even the hint of impatience. "As I said, Draco, you are not in a position of power. I don't have the time or inclination to be worried about you and what your plans are or to try to keep you in plain sight all the time. So you are going to tell me what I want to know."

Draco sighed, with what seemed like real regret. "I knew you'd make me. I've been thinking about what I would say all week."

He sat up straighter, but he didn't look at Harry once during what followed.

"When you spend your entire life among cruel, grasping people, and people who are truly insane, it can be hard to understand that some people are not like that. I have always thought that my family—that is, the parts of it that I knew—was comprised of greedy, prideful, and slightly mad people, and the only thing that kept my world from chaos was the allegiance they owed to a person more cruel, more prideful, and more insane than they. Nothing was important except being successful, and being a valued servant of the Dark Lord was the best kind of success, apart from money."

Harry tried not to throw up, and tried to get it. He'd asked for this, but he'd never thought it would actually happen. Draco was talking to him about something that Harry had hoped would come up between them over a year ago, when it would have done some good instead of being part of damage control. He had to listen to this. The worst part was, he was beginning to see that Draco had done the most good he had known it was possible for him to do, in his way. But he doubted Draco saw it quite yet.

"So that was my life. I believed all of it, Potter. Everything they've ever told me about blood status, money, the greatness of the Dark Lord . . . I was a believer. But my father taught me too well about being selfish, and I don't have the ability to show devotion to anyone at the expense of myself. At least, I don't think I do. Unless that's what I'm doing now."

The confusion in the other boy's voice was real, but Harry wasn't entirely buying what Draco was selling right now. There was one thing he wanted Draco to say, and it seemed more and more like Draco was going to dance around it and refuse to admit that he and Harry could ever be on the same side or believe any of the same things.

"So I . . . was concerned for my own well-being, more than that of the Dark Lord's. I don't suppose I can explain to you what a crime that is, for a person who . . . who . . ." Draco couldn't finish the sentence, but

he was clutching at his arm and Harry knew what was hidden under the sleeve of his robe. "It's unforgiveable, and I couldn't hide how much I resented being a pawn much longer. I would have been killed simply because I wanted to be successful. My father never really told me that success has a limit, I guess because the Dark Lord wasn't in power when he was raising me. So I've been forced to leave, because I won't be a servant any longer. I know they will kill me if they find me, for daring to think I'm important."

Draco gave him a sickly smile, to indicate that he was finished.

Harry let out a derisive little chuckle. "Bollocks."

Draco was entirely affronted, and looked ready to jump up and lay into Harry.

Harry leaned back in his chair, affecting an attitude similar to the one Draco had pulled when he came in. The only threat Draco could possibly pose to him was his status as a loose cannon, and Harry was resolving that right now, and he wanted Draco to know just how far his star had fallen. He needed to know that, if he was ever going to start crawling back up again.

"You can't expect to feed me that crap story and have me believe it."

Draco did stand up, hands clenched. "Well, what do you want me to say, Potter? You asked why I was here, and I told you!"

Harry gazed at him with patience, waiting for him to subside. "You told me a lie, actually. What you just said makes no sense in the context of your actions. I would like to think you know I'm smarter than that."

"Of course it makes sense, because that's what I did!" Draco shouted, his face turning red.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "Okay. You want money and success and more favour than you were getting from Voldemort? The way to get it was to make him happy. You make him happy by completing the task he gave you, and getting him into the school. You

claim to be selfish, but you didn't want to go to safety without your mother. You've actually given up your information to strengthen Hogwarts defenses against your purported master, and you've divided your family in two in such a way that you stand to lose all the money and influence that came from being part of it. Don't try to tell me you've done this because you're a selfish bastard looking out for yourself, because it's a lie."

Draco suddenly deflated. He sat back down, and he lost all his ire. "Then why did I do it? Tell me that, Potter. Because I honestly don't know."

"Just think about it, Draco. For just a minute, think about why you didn't let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts."

Draco was pale and miserable. "Because then it would be my fault," he said quietly. "When Greyback starts eating children right in front of me, I can't blame anyone but me. I knew I would never be anything but a pawn to him, and I wanted out, but . . . I was being honest. My father never taught me any morals that weren't tied up in my own self-interest or those of my family. But somewhere along the way I figured out it was wrong to take part in killing my own classmates, and somehow, it became more important not to do that wrong than to look after myself. So I came to Dumbledore, because he was a sap who'd take care of me just because I— well, for helping him."

"Say it, Draco. Out loud, tell me what it was you did."

Draco was disgusted. "Why?"

"Say it."

"I did the right thing," Draco muttered. He gave Harry a hard, angry look that was full of accusations, but it hardly seemed like he knew what he was accusing Harry of. "I did the bloody right thing, and I knew that Dumbledore would help me out for doing it. That's just about the only thing your side has got going for it, you know. They take care of each other."

“And now we’re taking care of you,” Harry said quietly. “You didn’t even have to be one of us. You just had to ask.”

Draco slumped back in his chair, but it was no pose this time, it was weariness and confusion. “Which makes no sense whatsoever. I can’t imagine how you think you could win when you operate like that.”

“But you’re here.”

“I know I am. But I still don’t think I know why.”

“It’s something you figure out as you go along,” Harry said gently. “Took me a while to decide to be here, too.”

Draco looked revolted by the comparison. “I am nothing like you, Potter.”

“I came here and asked for protection while I figured out what I wanted. Because I had made a choice to do the right thing and save some innocent lives at cost to myself.”

“But you act like you always knew it was right.”

Harry shrugged. “Sirius didn’t teach me about success. He taught me about knowing who I was. And I knew that I was a person who did the right thing, whatever the price. It cost me everything I wanted, you know. When I was twelve, Sirius and I had a real home and real family, and we were happier than we’d ever been or have been since. I had a girlfriend two years ago that I think I would have been really happy with if we’d gotten to stay together. But people were going to be hurt and killed while I was in a far-off place being happy, and I couldn’t live with that. Some part of myself that I didn’t know I had in me told me that I couldn’t live with that. So I made myself into a fighter through a lot of blood and sweat, and I left behind my home and family, and I came here against my will, to do battle with someone who is way stronger than I’m going to be for a long time.”

Draco just stared at him. This was the last thing either of them had expected to be doing.

"I don't believe it had to be me," Harry said. "I don't believe I'm special at all. But Voldemort got that idea in his head, so I've been forced to react to that. I've spent the past two years trying to figure out why I'm really here, and why I'm really fighting. It doesn't just come to you one day, out of the blue. You start with one right decision, and you work at it. It helps, when the people around you are doing the same thing. And the rewards . . . I never would have imagined what I'd get in return. I got Hermione."

"I am not on your side, Potter," Draco said softly. "I refuse to fight for the rights of Mudbloods and traitors. I'm only here because I won't be responsible for the destruction of Hogwarts."

"At least you don't have to see your Aunt Bellatrix anymore."

Draco shuddered. "I suppose I should have known that my mother's family wouldn't all be like her, but it surprised me, anyway."

Harry, who had only met Andromeda Tonks once so far and found her to be rather stern (although that might have just been her reaction to the news that her long-estranged sister and nephew were going to be sleeping in her daughter's old room and a bunch of Death Eaters were going to be looking for them). Still, she was a sight better than Bellatrix Lestrange.

"How are things over there?" Harry asked as casually as possible.

"I suppose it's quite splendid, for a prison."

Harry frowned.

"Oh, please, Potter. You don't think I'm stupid, or that my mother is stupid? We are well aware that you deliberately placed us where no one would look for us, and no one has been exactly shy about telling us we're not allowed to leave. What on earth does my father think has happened, anyway? Where are they looking? You must know something."

Harry shrugged. "Well. We let word get to the Death Eaters, and only them, mind you, that our side had something to do with your disappearance."

Draco looked at him blankly.

"That we used you as bait because you were easy to grab, and that you and your mother are dead as retaliation for Dumbledore," Harry clarified. "Not sure if they believe it. But they do know that even if you are alive, they won't get to you until they get to us. And so far, they haven't been able to do much to us. Only to innocent people who didn't see them coming."

Harry tried not to sound smug about the lack of casualties among the Order. It wouldn't last forever, and he knew that. But they were holding out, and they were still strong. Even with Dumbledore, their true leader, gone, the Order was still there and still fighting.

"So, now I know," Harry said, standing.

"Know what?"

"That you can't go back to their side, because you've finally realised that you are not an evil person. You tried so hard to be cruel and cold, but even you have your limits. You've figured that out, so I don't have to worry about you anymore. I'm not asking you to join our side, Draco. I'm not that foolish. But I won't have to watch you night and day, either. Don't think of where you are as a prison. It's exactly what you asked for. It's a safe house. And you'd better not take for granted how hard it is for the Tonks to take you in."

Draco's face was going red again, but Harry was strolling out. "I have some tricky potions experiments to work on," he announced. "Sirius can take you back to the Tonks's." Wolfsbane was a never-ending process, since he was brewing it for seventeen freaking werewolves, even if Sirius was doing some of the work. At least nine of them had jobs now, and they were contributing almost enough money for the supplies. Harry and Sirius weren't exactly getting paid for their work, but Harry found the bridge he was building to be far more important than money.

He had sort of forgotten how ill and exhausted Draco had become over this past year, but he certainly noticed when Draco transformed at the mention of potions experiments. The boy lit up like a kid on his birthday, and some of the pallor fell away from his face.

Oh, yeah. He'd sort of forgotten about how boring it would be to be stuck at your aunt's house when you hated her husband and had to cope with a decades-old feud—indefinitely.

"Come on," Harry said casually. "Just because you aren't on my side doesn't mean I won't put you to work." Inside, he was practically dancing with glee. Draco was probably the only person he knew with both the Potions skill and an inclination toward brewing that were necessary for this work—and the free time on his hands. If Draco proved capable and willing, it would be like Christmas come early.

"You cannot force me to work for you," Draco said primly. As he followed right at Harry's heels.

One week later, Harry was brushing a bit of plaster dust off his hands and feeling satisfied. They'd taken out the wall separating the two spare rooms in the house and converted it into a Potions laboratory. Using one spare room just wasn't enough anymore, especially since they now had someone who was interested in brewing all manner of healing potions and other things that would be useful to the Order of the Phoenix. Draco was no master brewer, but you didn't have to be as brilliant as Snape to make a Blood-Replenishing potion. Harry had shared a classroom with Draco for two years and trusted his skill well enough, although he still planned to personally be involved in the final stages of the werewolf's medication. That was too tricky and too important to trust to Draco Malfoy.

"Don't look smug, Potter," Draco said, sitting primly on a stool that he'd brushed free of dust with a clean handkerchief. "You have your end of the bargain to live up to, as well."

Harry took out his wand and began to assemble the furniture that was stacked in pieces in a corner of the newly designed room. "I haven't failed to live up to a promise yet," he said without concern.

"There's always a first time," Draco muttered, leaning over the small cauldron that was fuming greenish smoke into his face, his nose twitching as he picked out the smells and giving him the most unfortunate resemblance to a rodent. "Be my luck if it was me you let down."

Harry wasn't worried, because his end of the bargain was perfectly simple. When the war was over and Draco could come out of hiding, Harry was his character and job reference. He would have spent no small amount of time working for Harry, so Harry supposed it would have been only fair, anyway. And since he'd be hiding with his family instead of spending his seventh year at Hogwarts, he would desperately need the reference (assuming, of course, that his father didn't get killed by the Order and the Malfoy estate didn't automatically revert to Draco and leave him filthy rich).

"Mine is easy," Harry said, levitating a set of shelves up and Permanently Sticking them to the walls. "I just have to live through the war. You, however, have to brew acceptable potions of several varieties and fight your daily inclination to poison us all."

Draco was stirring his cauldron with steady hands, but he was pale and worried. "I don't lack motivation, Potter. You realise that I now have a personal interest in seeing your side win?"

"What's that?"

"If the Dark Lord is victorious, he will kill me and my mother," Draco said, in his most lazy, drawling voice. He didn't even bother looking up. "So it would really be to my benefit to do this job well, wouldn't it?"

Harry's mind briefly passed over Draco's. The outer calm was a truly impressive feat of control. Because inside, Draco was trembling and terrified. His revulsion over letting the Death Eaters into the school, and the mental and moral strength he'd marshaled to decide not to, had left him with no choice but to throw himself on the mercy of the

Order of the Phoenix. Not a good place to be, for someone with a Dark Mark on his arm. He couldn't know that someone else had done the same, years before, and had been treated as well as expected. He didn't know whose side Professor Snape was on.

"Well, then," Harry said, setting the last little table in place. "I'll leave you to it, and I'll go study. I have exams next week."

Draco finally looked up from his cauldron. "Didn't Professor Black tell you? I'm taking them, as well."

"You are?"

"Apparently he and Professor McGonagall are the only ones who will know about it, which is the only reason I agreed, but they will administer the exams to me and record my scores. Professor McGonagall is still acting Headmistress, so no one else need know."

"Well, that's excellent," Harry said. "You won't have wasted this whole year of school."

"Precisely, Potter. It is amazing what your mind can do when properly applied."

Harry rolled his eyes. "What about your NEWT year, though?"

"We haven't really come up with a solution to that, yet," Draco admitted, turning back to his potion and giving it a vicious stirring.

Harry shrugged. "Don't feel too bad. I haven't come up with a solution for mine yet, either."

Draco was startled by that. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Haven't really decided yet."

Draco was ready to ask a few more questions, but there was a voice downstairs calling out, "Hello?"

“Remus?” Harry muttered, confused, and left Draco there to hurry downstairs. “Hey, Remus, is that you?”

“Oh, Harry,” the werewolf’s voice floated from the hall. “Sirius here?”

“No, he had to oversee a couple of detentions today,” Harry answered, and finally met up with Remus at the foot of the stairs. “It’s good to see you,” he said, embracing the man. “Tonks isn’t with you?”

“She was last night,”—great Merlin, he still blushes when he says that— “but she had to go in for some kind of emergency at work.”

“Well, come on,” Harry said, leading the way toward the kitchen. “I’ll get you a cup of tea. Hungry?”

“No, not really. Kreacher isn’t making tea?”

Harry pulled a face. “I thought Tonks would have told you. He’s sort of on loan to her parents right now.”

“On loan?” Remus repeated in an unhappy tone.

“Oh, fine, we politely asked him and he politely agreed,” Harry corrected himself. “Either way, he’s staying with the Tonks family to help alleviate the burden of having the Malfoys there. He’s happy as a niffler with a pile of Galleons, waiting hand and foot on the most noble mistresses of the Black family.” He raised his voice, knowing Draco was listening from the top of the stairs. “And the mistress’s ferrety little brat!”

Then he cast a Muffliato charm on the kitchen.

Remus raised his eyebrows. “Take it someone else is here?”

“Draco,” Harry muttered, still not entirely sure how he felt about this whole situation. Here he was, giving Draco another chance, just like he’d decided he wasn’t going to do, and feeling satisfied because Draco was taking to it like a duck to water. For Merlin’s sake, maybe Draco had a point about their side being pushovers. “You really need to get over here more often so the information moves more quickly,”

he chided Remus. "The Order has agreed to let him work as a potions supplier for us just to give him something to do. And speaking of people who are happy as nifflers . . ."

Remus gave him a wide-eyed look. "You trust him with that?"

Harry shrugged. "He did tell us about the twin cabinets. And Tonks's mum caught him trying to slice off the skin on his left arm with a kitchen knife a few days ago."

Remus winced.

"Of course, it was a mark in his favour that he managed to whip himself up a healing poultice after she interrupted him."

Remus shrugged. "I suppose he must be competent, especially if he's qualified to take NEWT level potions from Severus."

Harry took a deep breath. "I'm going to have him help with the Wolfsbane treatments."

Remus scowled. "Harry, those are—"

"He will do it well, Remus," Harry interrupted firmly. "He doesn't have a choice anymore. He needs us more than we need him, and he's counting on my personal reference to survive once he can come out of hiding. He is going to do whatever pleases me."

"Harry," Remus said, using his best reasonable-but-firm voice, making Harry feel that he should politely listen, "I have asked my community to trust you with this, and you have made a real difference in their lives. However, asking them to trust a known Death Eater who has a history of changing loyalties is a different matter. It is not fair to give them such a gift and then, in essence, take it away by passing the responsibility to someone like Draco Malfoy."

Harry knew better than to suggest that Remus not tell them about the change in staffing in their impromptu Potions laboratory. He had too much respect for them to do that. "Do you trust me, Remus?"

Remus opened and closed his mouth, and looked angry.

“Well?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Then you can trust me to choose someone to help me work,” Harry said simply. “It’s too much for me to do on my own.”

“Okay, I understand that, but—”

“Draco is the only person I know who has the predilection for it, intelligence for it, and the time for it. Hermione could help, but she doesn’t really like Potions and she already has enough to do. It’s like I said: Draco is going to do what pleases me. He doesn’t have much of a choice.”

Remus looked awfully sad, at that. “All he’s really done is exchange one master for another, then.”

Harry froze. He felt exactly like he had the first time Miguel had launched a surprise attack and punched him in the stomach while he was clearing the breakfast dishes from the table. Stunned, breathless, almost as emotionally bruised as he had been physically. You didn’t just turn around and slug a part of your own family right after you’d eaten scrambled eggs together.

Harry staggered up from the table, breaking the wards he’d had on the kitchen as he passed through them and marched upstairs.

“Draco,” he said, standing in the doorway.

Draco had begun his painstaking project of organizing his supplies by applying coloured labels according to the type of ingredient and then placing the bottles on the newly installed shelves. He looked perfectly happy. His face sunk into a frown as he took in Harry.

“What did the werewolf do to you?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m not making you do this.”

Draco raised an eyebrow and set the bottle he was holding down on one of the tables. "I am not much in the mood for a game, Potter. If we must have another conversation in which you try to convince me that I am doing this simply out of the goodness of my heart, can it at least wait until I finish with this box?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I'm really not making you do this. I don't own you or your mother. You asked me for help, I gave you help, and I'm not asking you for anything in return. You don't work for me. I'll give you whatever you need after the war's over, either way. Just so you know that. You don't have to do this. Not to impress me, anyway."

Draco stared at him, looked down at the boxes stacked at his feet that were still waiting for his organizational touch, and back up at Harry. He rolled his eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous, Potter, what else would I do all day?" he muttered, and went back to his work.

Feeling a bit more absolved, Harry went back downstairs. Remus was still in the kitchen, nursing the remnants of his tea, with a look of guilt on his face.

"I didn't mean to make it sound like that, Harry," he said quietly.

Harry shrugged. "We've worked it out, so it's fine."

Remus frowned. "You don't mean he's actually volunteering for this?"

"He's been in hiding for a couple of weeks, and he's already bored out of his mind," Harry shrugged. "He has to do something."

Remus sighed. "I suppose you have your reasons for letting him do this."

Harry sighed back. "Thanks, Remus."

He got up and made himself a cup of tea. He debated making one for Draco, then dismissed the idea. If he wanted one, he could damn well make his own. High time he learned how.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” he asked as he poured.

“It’s about Simon,” Remus said reluctantly. “Cheers,” he added when Harry refilled his cup.

“What about him?”

“He’s thirteen, Harry.”

“I know.”

“He shouldn’t be with us. I wanted him to go to Hogwarts in the autumn, but I don’t think that’s likely to happen. I don’t know who will be running the school, but I’m sure it won’t be McGonagall.”

“He should be with you,” Harry argued. “You’ve all but adopted him.”

“More like having a very resentful stepson,” Remus said mildly. “At least he loves Dora. Anyway, it’s not that, I don’t mind having him with us. But it’s not safe anymore.”

“When was it ever?”

“Point,” Remus agreed. “But I think we both know that it’s about to get worse, much worse. And he’s just a kid. He shouldn’t be involved in the fighting. I want to get him out of there.”

“If he can’t go to Hogwarts . . .”

“I was hoping he could come here,” Remus answered.

Harry thought of Draco, working upstairs, of the amount of time Remus had lived here, and then thought about having Simon stay in the room Remus used to live in. He snorted.

“Bloody halfway house we’re running here,” he muttered. “Of course he can stay here, assuming he and Sirius don’t kill each other. Sirius doesn’t like teenagers with bad attitudes. He likes to beat it out of them.”

Remus shrugged. “He’s a scrawny kid. Might benefit from a little time in the training room.”

“You still practicing?” Harry asked.

Remus shrugged. “As much as it’s possible to do by oneself,” he said dryly, then slapped his firm abdominals. “Got to stay in shape for Dora’s sake, don’t I?”

Harry grinned. “Sirius wouldn’t stop complaining yesterday about dear cousin Andy, and how she’d never been so girly that he could remember. Apparently she’s got weddings on the brain.”

Remus blushed right to the roots of his hair.

“Aw, come on, Remus,” Harry cajoled. “She’s been practically living in your compound for months. You think we didn’t notice?”

His hands tightened on the cup in front of him. “It’s not . . . good for her,” he said, struggling to get the words out. “I mean, we’re doing our best on the legal front, and Madam Bones being the popular candidate for Minister is great news, but . . . I don’t know why she spends so much time with us. We take the potions, but that doesn’t make us safe.”

Harry just crossed his arms and glared at Remus. “It’s a little late for that, don’t you think? I mean, at some point you’ve got to stop with all this nonsense about not being good enough and wake up and realise you’ve been happily shagging for months and nothing bad has happened yet. She knows the risks and apparently thinks you’re worth it. Little harsh on her to think she has such terrible judgement, isn’t it?”

Remus took his cup over to the sink and rinsed it out. "I can't believe I'm having this conversation with you," he muttered. "It's like talking to Sirius all over again."

Harry thought his chest might explode with pride at the very idea. If all he accomplished in life was to be like his godfather, he'd be okay with that. He'd rather accomplish a great deal more, of course.

"Remus, I swear that if you don't ask her to marry you by the end of the summer, I will," Harry said severely.

Remus blinked at him.

"What? She's bloody gorgeous, isn't she? Smart, funny—she's got it all."

For a minute, Harry thought Remus was going to attack him. Instead, he just dried his cup and put it back in the cupboard, muttering, ". . . like he's channeling the bloody man . . ."

Harry got up to rinse out his own cup and gave Remus a poke in the ribs. "Just go with it and try to be worthy of her," he said. "It's what I'm doing."

"With Hermione?"

Harry nodded. "We're not quite at the stage you're at, yet, of course, but I think we might be before too long."

"You are far too young to think about marriage," Remus said with complete conviction.

"I'm turning seventeen in a month."

Remus blinked. "Merlin, I'm bloody old," he remarked, then strolled out into the hallway. "I should get going. Talk to Sirius tonight, would you, about Simon? Have him get in touch with me if it's all right with him."

Harry gave him a look. "As if it wouldn't be. I'll tell him when he gets here, but go ahead and have Simon pack up his stuff. He can move in tomorrow."

There was a thump upstairs, Draco moving something heavy, and Harry winced. "Boy, it'll be fun having those two under the same roof," he said brightly. "Barrel of laughs every day, I'm sure of it."

Remus winced, too. "Maybe we can convince Simon not to go into those rooms."

He and Harry looked at one another for a beat of silence.

"Maybe you'd better give Sirius a couple of days to get used to the idea," Harry finally said.

One week later, Harry and Hermione were cuddled up together on Harry's bed at home in Grimmauld Place. Their exams were over and they were both confident that they'd done well. They'd cast several spells on the door to be sure that they wouldn't have to hear anything going on in the rest of the house. Sirius and Simon were butting heads about twelve times a day, and Simon and Draco had become bitter enemies within five minutes of their first meeting. Luckily that hadn't been until two days after Simon moved in, because Harry doubted the boy would have stayed unless he'd already arranged all his stuff. Draco had taken particular relish in coming up with new synonyms for the word "freak."

Harry sighed with contentment and nuzzled his face against Hermione's neck, losing himself in the flowery scent of her hair. "Glad I don't have to worry about homework for a while."

Hermione made a soft noise. "I know better than to think you won't do any studies on your own this summer. And NEWT year is a killer, you saw how all the seventh-years looked these past few weeks."

Harry made a soft noise of his own.

Hermione shifted, raising herself up so she could look him in the face. "What is it?"

His face said it all.

"Oh, Harry, you can't leave now," she said in dismay. "You know how hard it is to get a career without any kind of educational certification."

"I'm not really worried about that right now," he said frankly. "With Dumbledore gone, that school is not going to be safe for me anymore. And I have a job to do."

"A job that Dumbledore forced on you by making it such a big secret," Hermione said fiercely.

Harry gave her a placid look. "I didn't have to take it. But I did. You know how important the secrecy is. Honestly, I wish I hadn't told Sirius, just because having the knowledge is dangerous, whether he uses it or not."

"Which is why you won't tell me what you know about what happened to Dumbledore," she said, still looking unhappy.

Harry nodded. "I would if I thought I could," he murmured, and pulled her back down to lay next to him. "But you have to at least let me maintain the illusion that I'm doing something to keep you safe."

Hermione wasn't thrilled, to say the least, but she didn't argue. She understood.

"So many secrets," she sighed. "Speaking of which, did you ask Sirius about the Secret-Keeper?"

"Yeah. He's told the Order that the new Secret-Keeper is already in place and refused to reveal their identity."

"But it's not true?"

“Apparently not. He wouldn’t tell me what was going on, though. He just said the person he wanted for the job wasn’t ready yet. He won’t tell me who it is or anything. Weird, right?”

“Very,” she agreed. “But Sirius knows what he’s doing.”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed. He buried himself in her hair again. “Hermione? I’m so glad that we can do this now. That you’re not so afraid, I mean.”

Hermione clutched his hand. “I am, sometimes. A little. The amount of time that’s passed has done a lot toward getting rid of the fear, but mostly it was just that I made the decision that I didn’t want to be afraid anymore. I knew Jonathan was no threat, but I was never all that attracted to him, anyway. But the relationship was good for me. It was . . . it seemed like I was in charge. That helped. But being with you . . . it’s scary in a different way. Just because it’s unpredictable. I’m not afraid of you, I trust you more than anyone in the world. And I’ve come a long way, too. But can you be patient with me, when I do get scared?”

Harry’s fingers tightened over hers. “Of course I can. This is good, right here.”

“For now.”

“Well, I haven’t had sex in a year and I might go mad, but yeah. This is good for now.”

She kissed his knuckles. “Thank you.”

“Hermione?” he murmured.

“What?”

“I just finished the most grueling school year of my life, and we’re already just laying in my bed here . . . can we take a nap?”

She chuckled softly. “I was about to ask the same thing.”

They slept.

He woke slowly, smelling ink and flowers and feeling safe and comfortable. He smiled. He'd enjoyed the sensation of waking up beside a girl before, another girl who was curvier and blonde and whose hair smelled of coconuts and her bed of sex. But this was different. This was the same feeling of warmth and delight, but stronger, and he hadn't even needed to have sex with the girl. That was how much he loved Hermione. He'd been wondering (although never admitting it, not even to himself) if he was capable of that kind of love. It appeared that he was.

She was looking at him, her back propped against the headboard. She'd been awake for a while.

"Hi," he said, groggy and making no effort to wake up any faster than his body wanted to.

"You're beautiful when you sleep," she whispered. But she was frowning.

"What's wrong?" he said, more alert instantly.

"Shhh," she said, laying a hand on his chest and pressing him down. "Nothing. You were talking in your sleep."

Heart thudding, he tried to remember having a conversation with Voldemort, but he was quite sure that he hadn't. Must have just been a normal dream, then.

"What did I say?" he asked with a lazy smile.

She didn't smile back. "You were very upset."

"I was?"

“You kept saying you weren’t going to be a lord. You kept saying you were going to put the wand away forever when you were finished. And that you didn’t have servants.”

“Oh,” he muttered, and turned his face away from hers. He didn’t know he’d been talking out loud in his dreams. Good thing he’d never gotten out of the habit of casting a spell around his bed in the dormitory, or his Gryffindor roommates would be seriously creeped out.

“Harry,” Hermione said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“I can’t help what I say in my sleep,” he said grumpily.

She leaned down and kissed his shoulder. “I know.” She pointed to the wand he’d left on his nightstand. “That’s your normal one, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he answered. “I’ve got the other one hidden for now.”

Hermione slid down in the bed and snuggled against his back. Now that he was awake, that wasn’t such a sleepy, comfortable pose. Good thing he was the one with his back turned to her. “It’s going to be okay.”

He grunted in disagreement. There wasn’t much that was going to be okay, not for a long time.

“You’re a good man.”

“Not yet,” he said wryly. “I’m still a minor.”

She pinched the skin on his side, which made him yelp but also made him more glad that he was facing away from her. “Don’t make light of my opinion of you. You should listen to me.”

“Thank you,” he said simply.

She relaxed against him a bit and murmured something about taking another nap, her breath tickling against his neck. He scrambled off the bed.

“Go ahead and sleep,” he said cheerfully. “I’m starving, I’m going to go fix something to eat. You want me to save something for when you wake up?”

She had an amused expression, almost cat-like on her face. Well, he supposed it was kind of obvious what his problem was. “Sure,” she said simply.

“Are your folks going to be worried about how long it’s taking you to get home?” he queried.

She shook her head. “They know I’m with you.”

Harry laughed. “And they have such a high opinion of me?”

“No, of me,” she retorted. Then her face closed down. “That’s likely to change soon.”

“What? Why?”

“Nothing, never mind,” she said. “Go get some food. I’m just going to sleep awhile longer.”

Harry frowned at her but did as she said. He met Simon in the kitchen, where he was, as usual, scarfing down anything in sight.

“I was hoping to get away from all the lovey-dovey stuff when I came here,” he said without preamble.

“I was going to say, ‘Hi, Simon, how are you?’ but since the obvious answer is ‘snarky as always, thanks,’ I’ll just skip it.”

Simon made a face.

“And if you say anything remotely resembling an insult to my girlfriend, I’ll dismember you,” Harry said in bright voice.

Simon looked shocked.

“Get used to it, mate, we’re rooming together all summer.” Harry went to the pantry and started rummaging around. Close enough to dinner time to start putting together a meal for everyone, he supposed. He was actually looking forward to it, he hadn’t cooked a thing since Christmas and he kind of missed the mundane pleasure. He hoped Hermione would stay for dinner.

Simon was drinking milk from one of the Engorged mugs they kept around for Hagrid. He finished it off while staring at Harry with an evil eye.

“Whatever,” he grumbled. “I know it’s your house, not mine. I’ll try to stay out of the way.”

Harry brushed his mind over the younger boy’s, and what he saw there made him both sad and angry. He thought he was getting passed around like the orphan he was, and he was trying to resign himself to never having a home. It made Harry angry because Simon was so obviously not giving Remus the credit he deserved.

“Remus was telling you the truth,” Harry said casually as he got out a pot to boil some pasta. “Things are about to get much worse. You’re a lot safer here.”

“I know that,” Simon said in a belligerent tone.

“If you believed it, you wouldn’t be feeling so sorry for yourself. He cares about you,” Harry said sharply.

“What’s it got to do with you?”

“It pisses me off that you think so little of Remus,” Harry shot back. “He’s one of the best men I know, and he’s given you a lot more than you’ve earned. I’d be a little more gracious, if I were you.”

Simon looked like he was ready to fight.

“If you want to start something, I will cheerfully prove to you just how badly I can hurt you. But I wish you wouldn’t. I’m really not in the mood to beat the crap out of you.”

Simon just stood there with his jaw locked and his hands trembling from clenching so tight.

“Listen,” Harry said in a much more sober, reasonable voice. “My parents died, too. I lived with Sirius a long time before I let myself love him. So I know the place you’re in. But sometimes, life gives you something good that you don’t want to trust, and my advice is to just take it because it’s not going to happen twice.”

Simon still didn’t look particularly convinced, but he didn’t look like he was on the verge of transforming anymore, either. Harry felt a lot of compassion for him, suddenly. It couldn’t be easy, to go from trying to live up to Fenrir Greyback’s expectations, knowing he was your only hope despite also knowing that he’d killed your father, all the way to being rescued by someone whose only expectation was that you accept some help as you tried to heal. Simon had first been taught that life was brutal, and now he was trying to deal with the idea that sometimes it could be kind. Confusing for anybody, much less for a werewolf who was also going through puberty.

“Also, meet me outside that room we keep locked, at eight o’clock tonight. I know something that might help.”

Simon looked interested, at last. “What’s in there?”

“Generally, a lot of pain and shouting,” Harry answered. “But don’t worry, it’s good fun.”

Chapter Thirteen

Harry spent the first month of summer at the head of the campaign for Amelia Bones for Minister of Magic. Rufus Scrimgeour, the other candidate, was a powerful and obvious choice, but since Harry had come down on Madam Bones' side, Scrimgeour had taken a disliking to Harry and Harry to him. Scrimgeour's campaign was doomed almost from the start, but for a reason that made Harry despairing instead of glad.

He could use his fame to point out why Bones was the better candidate all day. He could point out that while Scrimgeour might have slightly more experience with the Ministry's wartime needs, Bones was the one with the integrity to relinquish the excess power when the war was over. Did they really want to hand Scrimgeour nearly limitless political power, he could ask them, especially when they had another candidate who had just as much backbone but more wisdom? And he did. Many times. But the real reason that the public came down on Bones' side was simply this: when the campaign had first started, Scrimgeour had demanded answers about Dumbledore's death from Harry and had been made to look bad. Harry had seen his opportunity and played the wounded innocent. It had been traumatic beyond words to discover his mentor's body like that, he said, and he'd even scrounged up a few fake tears for the cameras that Scrimgeour had foolishly forgotten about. He was too much an Auror and not enough of a politician, which was the reason Harry thought he'd be such a dangerous minister, but that didn't mean it couldn't be taken advantage of.

So, Harry came out looking traumatized, Scrimgeour came out looking like a bully, and the outraged public declared their love for Bones. Harry was satisfied with the outcome, but the trick he'd had to pull and the exhausting manipulation of his fame . . . he was slightly sickened by the whole process. Not least of all because it seemed that he was good at it. He didn't want to be good at it.

However, in mid-July, Amelia Bones was made Minister of Magic and people stopped asking Harry questions about just how traumatic it had been to find Dumbledore (allegedly) murdered / killed by wasting disease. Harry had given a short statement to Gertrude Garnet and

then just pretended to be too upset to talk about it. He knew he had done the right thing by Dumbledore that night, and he actually thought he might be exonerated if it went to trial, but he was not about to condemn the Order's greatest asset to an excruciating death.

That was not the end of the press, of course. There were questions about who he thought might be Headmaster at Hogwarts, which he dodged—he could hardly come out and say that since the Board of Directors was controlled by Voldemort, then Acting Headmistress McGonagall would be lucky to keep her life, to say nothing of her job. He was leaving the problems with Hogwarts up to Sirius and Snape. Rita Skeeter, damn the bitch forever, had found out that he'd once been friends with Draco Malfoy and tried to publicly question him about the whereabouts of the boy and his mother. Harry smoothly replied that the friendship had ceased when Draco had chosen Voldemort over Harry and that Rita would do better to seek out the Dark Lord and ask him. Sounded just scathing enough to be convincing to the public, and also sent a message to the Death Eaters that Harry was not harbouring any warm feelings toward the Malfoys and they shouldn't hold out much hope of seeing them alive again.

Once the campaign was over, he retreated into his house. His appearances in public had been with extremely powerful wizards and witches and swarms of Aurors surrounding him. He wasn't about to go out in public alone. That would just be stupid. He kept from going barmy by spending a lot of time brewing with Draco and training with Simon, using them to break up his intense periods of study—Dumbledore had left nearly his entire personal library to Harry in his will, and Harry was only too glad to receive it. He was still sorting through it to decide if there was anything he'd rather donate to the Hogwarts library rather than keep. The pile was pitifully small. Mostly because Hermione sorted through things with him and kept talking him out of letting books go.

He hadn't seen a great deal of Sirius this summer, so far. The man was extremely busy. Somehow, not by his own design, Sirius was leading the Order of the Phoenix. By some combination of being entirely too clever, being a Hogwarts professor, and being Harry Potter's godfather, he'd got put in charge. He kept trying to foist it off

on Moody, but Moody wasn't getting any younger and Sirius was better connected to the various plots in motion.

As a result, Sirius spent most of his time ordering people around, organizing networks, gathering information, and being found by his godson in the kitchen at midnight with a cup of coffee and an exhausted, haggard look. Despite the angry, protective feeling this gave Harry, there was nothing he could do for Sirius except win this war. So he usually just forced some food into Sirius and tried to take the responsibility for the household off the man's shoulders. It meant he had to deal with listening to the Black sister's plans for Remus' and Tonks' wedding, look after Simon, and make sure Draco didn't burn the house down, but he was happy to do it if it meant Sirius got some sleep. Sometimes.

On 31st July, Harry rose at seven o'clock without any idea of the date. His routine was pretty well fixed at this point, and he followed it with the same feelings of grim resoluteness that he'd been harbouring for the past month and a half. He went to Hogwarts for an early morning run. He imagined he was running between four and five miles per day now, but it caused him no innate sense of satisfaction anymore—it was just a good idea to stay in shape. He often took his broom and put himself through a flying workout as well, then some simple forms and mind-clearing exercises to cool down.

He returned home around nine o'clock, showered, and ate a bland but nutritional breakfast. At nine-thirty, he checked on any potions that Draco might have left to cook overnight, then he went into the study. He practiced Mermish by translating a children's book aloud, then studied one of the Transfiguration books that Dumbledore had left to him. At noon, he put the books aside and fixed lunch for himself, Simon, and Draco. Draco wasn't here every day, but he was generally included in the routine. Sirius wasn't here today, for some reason, but Harry didn't worry about it. Sirius often wasn't home. He spent about an hour working with Draco, then spent another hour in the training room with Simon.

Hermione showed up at teatime.

“Hi,” he said, feeling a smile on his face for the first time all day.

“Hi,” she replied in a happy voice, and stepped forward so he could slide his arms around her and place a gentle kiss on her forehead. They hadn’t moved to any overtly sexual displays yet. They had talked it over at some length, and decided that before they started doing anything serious, they were going to let Hermione get comfortable with someone larger and stronger than her. They touched as often as possible, holding hands, cuddling together, laying down for a nap together, and whatever else they could find to do. Harry had started brushing her hair, just so he could get his hands on the beautiful mess of it, and that was surprisingly intimate. She sometimes massaged his sore muscles if he put himself through a particularly grueling workout. The idea was that when (they had cautiously and almost shyly decided that it was when, not if) Harry took her to bed, she’d already know, with her physical instincts as much as her rational mind, that the person she was with would never hurt her, and that she already knew his body just as well as he knew hers.

They spent a few minutes cuddling, then went to work sorting through Dumbledore’s (Harry’s) library. While they worked, they talked about what Harry was going to do next. Harry made sure to cast a few spells to be sure Simon and Draco wouldn’t be privy to the conversation. He felt confident in his knowledge of all the Horcruxes and he had collected all the basilisk venom that Dumbledore had saved from the destruction of the beast several years ago. He was fairly certain that he didn’t want to cast Fiendfyre at the Horcruxes, but it was a viable alternative if he lost or ran out of the venom.

“Fiendfyre, Harry?” Hermione said doubtfully, looking up from her perusal of a cracked old book he’d put on the Hogwarts donation pile. “I think you should keep this one, by the way.”

He rolled his eyes at her predictable attitude toward not keeping the book.

“Well, if I had to do it, I’d ride my broom out into the middle of the Atlantic and cast the curse there. I’m just saying, it’s an option.”

"I'm sure there are other ways to destroy a Horcrux, besides basilisk venom and Fiendfyre. We should get back to our research on that."

Harry made an agreeable noise, but all he said was, "I can destroy Nagini just by killing her, I think. We'll go with the basilisk venom for now and look at other ideas if we need them. I've got to save some room in my brain for my NEWT studies."

"Even though you're not taking them," Hermione grumbled.

They'd had this conversation. He couldn't go back to Hogwarts. He'd likely get snatched right out of his bed at night and dragged before Voldemort. He wasn't giving up his studies, but he couldn't be anywhere visible for a while. He'd made an exception for Madam Bones' campaign speeches, but he'd been so thickly surrounded by Aurors that he'd been willing to risk it a few times.

So he ignored the grumbling. "I think I'd better start practicing with the Elder Wand soon," he said instead.

It was upstairs, in his room, although it was currently disguised as part of the bedframe. He planned to begin using it soon, not exclusively, but often enough to get a feel for it and ensure that when he confronted Voldemort it would work for him. Hermione had asked him what he would do with it after he faced Voldemort. Harry replied that he'd likely work it back into a bedframe and leave it the hell alone. Then she asked him what he was going to do when he confronted Voldemort. That he had no answer for. It was a good question, and Harry had been thinking about it often.

He would not kill Voldemort. He absolutely would not do that. He had tasted the idea of it in those last moments with Dumbledore, but the situation was so different. He knew that his assistance to Dumbledore had wounded him terribly, though his soul had not exactly fractured. He was changed by that experience. Voldemort was not ill, had no intentions of dying, and his death was to be considered punishment for his crimes. Harry wasn't so far outside the law yet that he felt justified in carrying out an execution under his own authority. No, he could not kill Voldemort. Could not without becoming something . . .

something as wrong and evil as Voldemort himself. He was not a murderer, and he was going to keep it that way.

So what he would do, was make Voldemort mortal again. He was going to force the man to see that he was nothing more or less than a wizard, bound by wizarding laws and with the limitations of mortality. He was going to take away his Horcruxes, he was going to tie him up in ropes, and he was going to deliver him to the Ministry's door for trial. The utter humiliation of being put on trial and having to answer for his crimes would be a far more cruel fate, for a person like Tom Riddle, than mere death would be. Harry was pretty sure the fellow was going to get the death sentence for his crimes. He would get Kissed, anyway. Say, there was a thought. Maybe Dementors could kiss Horcruxes. Good backup plan, that. Unless it turned them into Horcruxes, a thought that would keep anyone up nights.

He didn't explain the part about Dumbledore's death to Hermione, but he did tell her everything else. He needed her to know that he wasn't considering murder. Hermione suddenly dropped everything, pulled him over to the sofa, and practically sat on him to hold him there. She wrapped her arms around him so tightly that it almost hurt.

"This shouldn't be so hard," she whispered roughly. "You shouldn't have to do so much. It's not fair that it has to be you."

Harry gave her a confused look. "Hermione . . . I chose to do this. I said I would."

"Only because Voldemort was already after you and Dumbledore already thought it was inevitable that you were it," she argued.

Harry gave her a crooked smile. "You of all people know how stubborn I am. You really think I'd let old Voldemort and Dumbledore tell me what to do?"

She let out a disbelieving little laugh. "Harry," she murmured, nearly squeezing the breath out of him. "I know you're taking on the responsibility willingly. But . . . look at how much it's changed you. It'll keep changing you. And it will change me, too. Can you blame me for being a little angry and scared?"

Harry hadn't thought about that. That all this was going to fundamentally change Hermione, as a person. And that she was choosing to stay with him despite how frightening that was.

"Hermione," he said slowly. "I don't want that for you." Their policy of openness and honesty was hard to get used to. There were so many opportunities to hurt one another's feelings. But they already knew that they didn't mean to do that, so they were learning to ignore hurt feelings and look at what lay behind them. "I don't want you to change just to stay with me. I'm not sure what to feel about this. I know that you are capable of making your own decisions. And you know how much I want you with me. But I think I'm going to feel very guilty about what I'm going to put you through. I already do feel guilty."

"How can you feel guilty when it's my decision?"

Harry bit his lip. "Because it wouldn't happen if it weren't for me. Guilt isn't always rational, you know."

"No, but you are always rational," she argued.

"I know you're afraid. You've told me. I honestly don't know why you're still here, Hermione. I don't know what you're doing with me, when all I can be right now is a source of pain and fear for you. I realize now why you broke up with me to begin with. I don't know why you came back."

Hermione grabbed his face in her hands and gave him a look of blazing passion. "You are my best friend, Harry Potter. You care more about me than I ever imagined a man could, and you've given me freedom from at least one of my worst fears. You have trusted me and included me in every part of your life that you can. I know that there are things you can't tell me, but we have managed to maintain our respect for one another in spite of that. I don't think I'm going to find that anywhere else. You are a good, brave man. You are the most intelligent person I know, with the passion for learning I never thought I'd find in anyone but myself. You are patient, and courageous, and so many other things."

Harry tried not to let her see the doubt in his eyes. He knew that he was patient with her fears, that he must be brave to be facing down the dangers in his life without going screaming mad. He knew he cared about her, because his heart practically stopped every time he looked at her and because he'd never taken so much joy from simply holding a girl's hand until Hermione. He knew that she was speaking the truth about him. But for Merlin's sake. He was a former fugitive, he'd hired prostitutes, he'd cursed the previous Minister's undersecretary, he'd nearly failed music theory class, and he'd been callous enough to take the Elder Wand from Dumbledore when he should have been weeping. And if she stayed with him, there was a good chance that she could get tortured and murdered. And he might get tortured and murdered, and if she survived, who knew if she'd be brave enough to risk another relationship?

Before he could point any of this out, she leaned her forehead against his and closed her eyes against the tears welling in them.

"And if I'm not here, I'm afraid of what might happen to you," she whispered. "You need me, Harry. I'm not trying to stroke my ego. You need me."

"I do," he admitted, gratefully holding her against him. He was grateful because she already understood this and he didn't have to explain it to her. She was his insurance against the darkness in his own heart. As long as she was there and he had to meet her eyes, he would kill himself to keep from disappointing her. If she wasn't there . . . he might not. And that possibility scared him more than any ideas about his fate at Voldemort's hands. "I'm so selfish, Hermione, I'm sorry. But don't leave me. Please don't leave me."

"I'm not going to, you dolt. Now, then. Come on."

"What? Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise. And I know you trust me, so don't start dragging your feet now. Don't tell me you're out of Floo powder?"

“There’s a new package in the kitchen,” he said in bewilderment. “Why?”

“We’re going somewhere that we can forget about all of this for a few hours,” she declared grandly.

Harry was entirely certain that wasn’t possible, but he followed her. Because trust was the most valuable commodity in the world, and he wasn’t about to let theirs lose any of its value.

Neville had cautiously agreed to meet Sirius Black in his classroom at Hogwarts on 31st July, despite the fact that the professor had refused to explain the nature of the meeting. The man was taking no chances with possible monitoring on fireplaces. Much easier to combat spies once they were in the school, since he was a true master with warding spells. Something to do with warding an entire town against vampires, though Neville had considered this to be a fabrication to impress the younger students to pay attention in his classes.

They met in the early afternoon, and Professor Black looked as deadly sober and determined as Neville had ever seen a man look. Neville felt some pity for him. He’d had a rough time of it since Albus had died. Neville was actually feeling kind of good that day, since he’d just used Apparition for the first time without supervision. He’d turned seventeen yesterday, and he could get used to the idea of doing magic whenever he bloody well wanted to.

But seeing the professor shocked him out of his good mood. He was invited to have a seat.

“What’s going on, Professor?” Neville asked cautiously.

The man sighed. “You’re seventeen and I’m about to make life even harder for you than it already is, Neville. Just call me Sirius, okay?”

Neville couldn’t shake the feeling that he just wanted to be called that because he was still, after all this time, sort of a rebel and liked to

undermine established authority. But he nodded agreeably and waited for the purpose of this meeting to be revealed.

“As you know, the Board of Directors belongs to Voldemort,” the professor said bluntly. “I’m not sure exactly who’s going to be made Headmaster, but it’s going to happen within a week or two. It’s likely to be Snape.”

Neville paled at that. He was entirely against the idea of having the (alleged) murderer of Albus in charge of his school. But Neville was getting highly practiced at rolling with the punches, and he just nodded for Sirius to continue.

“McGonagall’s got only a few days left as Acting Headmistress to do what she can for the students next year. She’s trying to firm up staff appointments as much as possible, despite the fact that Professor Burbage has gone missing and we doubt we can get her replaced. I don’t think they’ll want Muggle Studies at the school anymore.”

Neville knew what “gone missing” meant, these days. He swallowed a sick feeling. Professor Burbage was a nice woman and it didn’t seem right that she’d been killed just for the subject she taught.

“The other thing we’re doing is appointing you Head Boy.”

Neville stiffened. “What?”

Sirius raked his hands through his tangled hair, which was escaping from its usual ponytail. “Head Boy, Neville. You’re going to be in charge of as much as we can give you. What we’re hoping is that the new Headmaster, Snape or whoever, won’t feel they have enough power immediately to get rid of you and appoint a new one.”

“Why me?” Neville asked faintly.

Sirius gave him a sad look. “Because we believe in you, Neville. Why else?”

“I’m not anything special,” Neville protested. “I don’t have the highest marks or anything.”

"You're a prefect and you're the leader of the DL," Sirius said, rolling his eyes. "Merlin's sake, boy, what else would we look for in a Head Boy?"

Neville poked at this idea, feeling at it like it was a loose tooth. He'd gotten too used to being sort of reviled by the other students, and the changes that had taken place over the last couple of years had crept up on him. He was surprised to realise that the members of the DL all liked him, and that he was an effective prefect. He wasn't the best student ever, wasn't even taking Potions anymore, but he wasn't the worst, either. Weird to think that he'd ended up being exactly what Dumbledore had wanted him to be, after all.

"Okay," Neville said calmly. "I reckon you're expecting me to sort of buffer the students from whatever the new headmaster throws at them?"

Sirius nodded tightly, looking ashamed. "It's likely to hurt."

"I would have volunteered if I knew you needed someone," Neville said lightly. Pain didn't bother him much. Not being able to fight in this war was worse. "Who's Head Girl?"

Sirius tried to straighten his hair again. "We haven't been able to reach a decision there, yet. We think Miss Weasley is the best candidate, but she obviously can't take the position, being a sixth year. Miss Patil's not the right material, brave as she is, and I don't think enough of the school will respect Miss Abbot." He shrugged. "Any ideas?"

Neville thought about it. The answer was glaringly obvious, but he hated it, and he didn't want to say it. Unfortunately, Sirius was right about how limited their options were. Damn Cho for graduating, anyway.

"Veronica Vanderlay," he sighed, forcing it out.

Sirius gave him an affronted look. "Slytherin prefect who nearly lost her badge when she got caught behind a suit of armour trying to swallow her fellow prefect Blaise Zabini? That Veronica Vanderlay?"

Neville sighed again. "Yes."

Sirius crossed his arms. "I'm listening."

"She's a Slytherin prefect," Neville said. "You have to see the advantages of that."

Sirius's eyebrows went up. "Oh."

"If she and I come together as a package deal to the new Headmaster, Head Boy and Head Girl already chosen . . ."

". . . he might actually allow it," Sirius said, sounding impressed. "Sneaky."

"Not to mention the third of the school that won't like having me in charge won't mind having her. Between the two of us, we'd pretty much have the student population's support."

"You've got one very big problem," Sirius said. "She's a Slytherin. How on earth are you going to work together with her?"

"Well, she's loads more reasonable than Pansy," Neville pointed out. "She's actually got some class and we've worked together as prefects without resorting to curses. Can't say the same for Pansy, unfortunately. For her."

"You're saying you think you can work with her? That the two of you can agree on things?"

"Doubt we'll agree on much," Neville said. "But I think she'll do her part to keep the students from coming to harm. She's not really the violent type."

"I'm still not thinking this is a great idea."

"I'm one of the very few people who know what really happened to Draco Malfoy," Neville said as his closing argument. "And that definitely works in my favour to get her indebted to me."

"What?"

Neville rolled his eyes. "I don't know why you professors think you know so much."

"Well, we— hey!" Sirius' face darkened. "I don't really have the energy to play games, Neville. Tell me."

"I'm sorry," Neville apologized. He knew this was serious business, but he thought he could be forgiven for trying to find some lightness in all of it. "Let's just put it this way, sir. If Veronica didn't want to get caught, she'd have let Blaise talk her into somewhere a little more private."

"She wanted to get caught?"

"She wanted to make Draco Malfoy jealous to spur him into lavishing her with attention."

Sirius said nothing, but the look on his face was priceless. "She's in love with that little ferret?"

"Madly," Neville said, rolling his eyes. "Her plan didn't really work out, of course, since Draco was busy spiraling down into madness and treason and didn't take much notice of it. She got stuck with having Blaise as a boyfriend, but she's not exactly getting dragged into kicking and screaming, him being good-looking and rich and all. But I am pretty sure I can get some concessions out of her in exchange for some information about Draco."

"And you think it's a good idea to tell her Draco's whereabouts?"

"His whereabouts are not what I was planning to tell her, no," Neville said thoughtfully. "I was mostly just going to tell her that he'd defected. It'll come out eventually anyway, so there's no harm in her knowing."

And she just might think it's a good idea for her to work on the same side he does in the hopes of seeing him again and impressing him."

Sirius was quiet for a long time.

"You do know that you are one sneaky bastard," he said at last, sounding impressed. "I'll talk to Minerva about it. But before this can happen, you and I are going to sit down and work out a foolproof way to ensure the information stays with Miss Vanderlay. I absolutely am not going to jeopardize the agreement Harry has with Draco. There are far too many people affected by it now."

Neville nodded. "I understand."

"There's something else I want from you, Neville," Sirius said abruptly. "I've thought about this until I've nearly driven myself mad, but I'm sure you're the proper person for what I need. I just couldn't ask you until you were of age."

"What?" Neville asked curiously.

"Well, you're close enough to us that it makes sense, yet far enough away that no one would think of you. And I absolutely cannot think of anyone more committed to our side than you are. I know how much you and Dumbledore loved each other, and I know of no one who is more unquestioningly stalwart in his convictions. I am absolutely certain I can trust you with this—and if you know my history, you know this is not a decision I'm undertaking lightly."

Neville just waited. He had no idea what Sirius wanted, but he wasn't sure he was going to like it.

"I want to make you the Secret-Keeper for Headquarters for the Order. Dumbledore put the place under a Fidelius charm, and I want to renew it with you, Neville."

Neville was shocked. "You really want me to do that?"

Sirius nodded. "You are the one person I know beyond a shadow of a doubt will never betray us. I thought about having Harry do it, but he's

too obvious a choice, as is anyone in the Order. Dumbledore was strong enough that it didn't matter how obvious a choice he was. Now we have to be a little more clever."

Neville could see all the things that had gone into this decision, and he could see what made him such a good choice. And, well, he was already going to be Head Boy and leader of the DL. He wasn't exactly making a choice between being in danger or out of it. Might as well.

"Okay," he said soberly.

They performed the spell, Sirius walking Neville carefully through the process. Then it was done, and Neville felt strangely heavy, like bags of sand had been placed about him.

"I've been told it's disconcerting at first," Sirius said compassionately. "It'll feel better after a few days. You'll need to write down the location on something so I can show it to the Order members."

"Don't they already know it?"

"They did when Dumbledore had the keeping of it. But that's the beauty of Fidelius charms," Sirius grinned. "Handy, aren't they?"

Neville smiled back and carefully wrote down Sirius' address on a piece of parchment.

"Once I show this to everyone who needs it, I'll destroy it," Sirius said. "Try to make sure none of your school papers leaves the school, okay? I don't want a sample of your handwriting to become available to anyone to compare this note against. I don't want anyone even in the Order to know who you are."

Neville nodded soberly. "I have some of my school papers in my trunk at Gran's," he said. "I'll go home and burn them."

"Later," Sirius said repressively. "We have to go upstairs first."

"Upstairs?" Neville repeated cautiously. "What's upstairs?"

"The upper floors," Sirius answered. He shook Neville's hand. "I know this is a little bit more responsibility than you were likely picturing on your first day of adulthood, but thank you, Neville. Now, we're going to be working together quite a bit, so you'd better get used to trusting me. Come with me."

Neville followed him with trepidation. He reflected that while Sirius was correct, and he hadn't really pictured coming of age entailing quite this much danger to his person, he certainly hadn't argued about it. Maybe he had a death wish. Or maybe Albus had been right about his being so completely good and brave that he'd never question doing whatever was necessary. Strange thought, that. He wasn't a hero or anything like that. But he was pretty sure he'd die before giving up the Order or his fellow students to Voldemort. And he was pretty sure he'd fight like hell before dying, as well. So maybe it was okay to feel a little bit like a bad-ass.

Neville was kind of surprised to see Hermione and Harry when they got to the seventh floor, although Sirius and Hermione didn't seem too surprised to see one another. Harry was looking more suspicious all the time.

"We're at the Room of Requirement."

"Very good for stating the obvious, Harry," Sirius remarked.

"What's in the Room of Requirement?"

"Whatever we require, honestly, Harry," Hermione sighed.

Neville felt some solidarity with Harry. "I'm not going in there."

"Of course you are. We are all on the same side and working together and we'd never bring you to harm," Sirius said patiently. He paced in front of the blank wall until the door appeared.

Harry and Neville met one another's eyes as they were forced through the door, not liking this one bit. They were bonded, for the

moment, ready to work together to face whatever was about to hit them.

Their eyes were assaulted by colour and loud banging, by a crowd of people, and they both automatically assumed that these sensory clues added up to the fact that they were being attacked by a range of spells.

“SURPRISE!” the entire room shouted cheerfully.

Then a good quarter of them fell to Harry and Neville’s wands before the two boys noticed the gigantic banner over a table loaded with food that said “Happy Birthday!” with too much artistic flair to have been contributed by anyone but Dean Thomas. They both sputtered to a halt and began to sheepishly revive their fallen friends. After sorting out that they were at a surprise birthday party that the DL had planned for them, they were content to eat their cake and share a few butterbeers and feel inordinately happy at this proof that quite a few people found them worthwhile.

Everyone giggled at what had happened when Neville and Harry had come in. But it wasn’t really that funny, when they thought about it.

That night, the reminder that he could use magic anytime he liked fell on Harry fully. It was time. He couldn’t wait any longer to begin his quest. He needed to find the Horcruxes and destroy them, and he needed to do it immediately. There was one more meeting that had to take place.

He used one of the school owls to send a message to Professor Snape. Then he sent an owl to Minister Bones to remind her that he was strongly in support of the idea that Kingsley Shacklebolt should be her undersecretary. Then he sent an owl to Flourish and Blotts to have all required Hogwarts textbooks for his NEWT year delivered to Hermione’s house. He returned to the remnants of the party (which was clearing out now) to ask Hermione to come by the house tomorrow. She agreeably said she would, then froze in surprise.

“What is it?” he said, touching her arm.

"I don't know how to get there," she said slowly. "Why don't I know that?"

Harry gripped her arm harder. "Um, I don't think I know, either. Sirius!" he shouted.

The man was by his side in an instant at his panicked call. "What's wrong?"

Harry spoke in a low voice. "You renewed the charm on the house?"

Sirius reached into his pocket for the slip of paper. "Yeah, here you go."

They both read the paper and relaxed a bit, then Sirius tucked it out of sight again.

"Who is it?" Harry asked. "Handwriting's sort of familiar . . ."

Sirius shook his head. "Nothing doing, kid. You don't need to know."

Harry bit his lip. "Yeah, you're right."

Hermione slipped her hand into his.

"What?" he asked her.

"You haven't bit your lip like that in a long time," she said. "I'd forgotten you used to do that when you were nervous."

The fact that he was doing it again meant his nerves and stress were distracting him to inexcusable levels. He resolved not to do it ever again. His use of Occlumency was not going to be particularly useful if his face gave it all away already.

"Tomorrow," Harry said, breathing in one last good whiff of her smell.

"Okay," she said. "What's going on tomorrow, though?"

“A meeting,” he muttered. “You’ll see.”

Chapter Fourteen

It took place in a Muggle pub in a busy section of London that did not pay attention to strangers. London was a busy city, a melting pot of cultures that was stirred by speeding cars, camera-happy tourists, and a staggering number of historians. Four unfamiliar faces sitting down for a few pints in one of its many pubs went entirely unnoticed.

Harry still had his Australian identification card that showed his age at twenty-one and well old enough to drink, but the barman barely looked at him before serving him and certainly didn't ask for proof of age. He'd offered to try to get a false ID for Hermione, but she was disinclined to drink in either case. Sirius was disinclined to do this sober and promised to drink enough to make up her share. The three of them had plenty of Muggle clothes to choose from, so they didn't stand out as they found a table and waited. Harry wasn't worried about their fourth member standing out, but he was slightly curious as to where he might obtain Muggle clothes.

When Snape walked in, Harry almost missed him. Partly it was the way the button-down and slacks took away his ability to swoop in and look imposing, and it was also partly that Voldemort's pride and attention to appearance had forced the man to look more polished and less like a greasy git. It also had a lot to do with the fact that he no longer radiated the attitude of a bitter curmudgeon and now displayed the symptoms of a haunted man on the run—sort of like Sirius when Harry had first met him. But still, there couldn't be two men walking into this pub that had that sallow face and gigantic nose, could there?

Snape sat at their table without a glance to the bar. He obviously wanted to get this over with quickly. Sirius shook his head and pushed the beer he'd given Hermione for the sake of appearances across the table.

"Don't stand out," he warned the other professor.

Snape glared down at the drink and then at Harry.

"I assume you realise how difficult it was for me to come here without suspicion, and I therefore assume that we are not here for a friendly chat over lunch."

Harry let out a deep breath and suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. "Just trying to get you killed, sir," he said flippantly. "Start drinking before people wonder what you're up to."

Snape took a very grudging drink.

"All right, Harry," Sirius said, "what's this all about?"

Harry shrugged. "I reckon we'll only get to do this once before we're caught, so we need to share as much information as possible right now."

"Why now?"

"Because we don't have time to waste, obviously," Harry said impatiently. He looked at Snape. "Are you going to be headmaster this year?"

Snape nodded. "It will be my duty to rid the school of its undeserving Muggleborns," he said dispassionately. It gave no indication how he felt about this task.

"If I stay at the school where they can find me, you'll be forced to fire Sirius?"

Snape almost smiled. "I think it would not be by force."

Harry again suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. "But I'm likely to get snatched out of my bed one night and taken to Voldemort, yeah?"

Snape nodded again.

"And if I leave the school and hide, Sirius will get taken?"

"If you are so capable of discerning the outcome on your own, why am I here?"

“Because we’re planning the end of this damn war, that’s why,” Harry said in an almost pleasant voice. “We kind of need to cooperate on this, don’t you think?”

What Snape may have thought went unanswered, since Harry didn’t give him time to do so.

“It means Sirius and I will both have to leave the school, doesn’t it?”

Now Snape looked surprised, as if the idea that they would both flee had not occurred to him. “To avoid either of you being captured, it is the course I would recommend.”

Sirius looked angry at this idea. “Now, hold on a minute, here—”

“Sirius,” Harry said quietly. “You know we have to do this. It’s not like you won’t have other things to occupy your time.”

Sirius slugged down the rest of his drink and looked longingly at the bottom of the glass. “Remus has been worried about Simon’s education, I suppose that’s something I could do. And . . . other people’s education might need guidance.” He made a face at that.

Snape had no idea what Sirius was talking about, and obviously did not care. “And what is it that will occupy your time, Potter?”

“The task Dumbledore gave me,” Harry answered. That was all he planned to say about it to Snape. “I hope that it won’t take me too long, but I’ll need at least a month or two.”

Snape looked grave. “Be certain, Potter. Too much time, and the Dark Lord will have grasped enough power that we will no longer be able to take it back from him.”

Harry nodded. “I know.”

Sirius suddenly sat forward in his chair. “Oh, Severus, there’s something you need to know. Minerva and I made Neville Longbottom the Head Boy this year. Try to leave him there, would you? If I can’t be there to offer some protection from the standards

you're going to enforce, those kids are going to need somebody they can go to."

Snape sneered at that, but seemed to be thinking about it.

"We made Veronica Vanderlay Head Girl," Sirius said almost casually. "Reckon that makes Neville less of a problem for you."

Snape gave a careful nod. "We shall see."

Harry was giving Sirius a curious look. "You didn't tell me you were going to do that," he muttered, but that was the extent of his comments and complaints on the topic. He leaned back and snaked his arm around Hermione, who'd been suspiciously quiet. "That's all from me. I'm disappearing, Sirius is disappearing, and you're headmaster. Anything we need to know from you?"

Snape gave him a cold look. He was obviously itching to say something snarky but useless and was at war with the knowledge that he couldn't waste this meeting.

"Persecution of Muggleborns is going to become far more open," he said at last. "We are already infiltrating the Ministry, and Hogwarts is the only institution that could stand up to the Ministry before now. Since I am put at its head, I will be expected to cooperate with my counterparts in the government. Things will devolve quickly. If you expect to not get captured, you cannot rush to the rescue in some foolhardy fashion when you hear reports of these things, despite your inclination for such."

Harry was puzzled. "I'm not much for foolhardy rescues."

"What on earth do you call what you did in the Department of Mysteries?" Snape asked in a silky voice.

"Tactics," Harry said without concern. "I wanted Voldemort to think I was an idiot. Seems to have worked. Of course, I was also trying to hold him there until enough people showed up to capture him or at least confirm his return, and that worked out pretty well, too. Oh, and you notice how much power Lucius Malfoy has lost since he's had to

scramble to stay out of jail? I thought I did pretty good for being a fool rushing into a dangerous situation.”

Snape just glared at him.

“Okay, I think we’re all on the same page,” Harry said brightly. “Anyone want another drink before we say goodbye?”

He received two glares, and Hermione still didn’t break her strange silence to respond with her normal dismissal of his more absurd ideas. Snape stood up and departed without another word, but Harry jumped up to follow him. He gripped the man’s arm, hard. Lucky he couldn’t get hexed out here in front of Muggles.

“We’re going to win,” Harry said in a low, rough voice. “I’ll make sure of it. Just stay alive, okay?”

Then he released Snape and went back to their table.

“We ready to go?”

Sirius and Hermione got up immediately, neither of them looking particularly happy.

“What was the point of all this?” Sirius growled.

Harry shrugged. “I was giving Snape time to prepare for our disappearance. I’d rather he not get found out as a spy and killed while we still need him. And I know you, Sirius. You’d never have quit if you didn’t hear from Snape personally that he was going to fire you, anyway.”

They walked in silence until they found a nice, deserted alley to Apparate in, and they returned to Grimmauld Place. Hermione took Harry aside when he made to follow Sirius upstairs to check on Simon.

“Why did you want me there?” Hermione asked him curiously. “I didn’t want to say anything because I had no idea why I was invited.”

Harry was almost as confused as she was. "Well, you needed to be part of the meeting, of course."

"You could have told me about it later."

"But you should be involved in the planning, since it's about your life as much as mine."

"It is?"

"Hermione, I'm not going to be able to stay here in London," Harry said softly, drawing her into his arms. "I thought you knew that."

She was stiff against him. "Where are you going?"

"I haven't quite figured that out yet," he admitted. "But I knew better than to think you'd let me go without you."

"Darn right," she muttered, feeling choked up and pressing her face into his shoulder.

"Since I knew you'd be coming with me, I didn't think it was fair to leave you out of the meeting."

Hermione nodded her acknowledgement. "Thank you, Harry."

He kissed the top of her head. "Are you hungry? Do you want me to cook you something?"

She shook her head. "No. Let's just finish sorting out those books."

Harry sat silently at the kitchen table, the fake locket and the mysterious note in front of him. He had one hand wrapped around a mug of coffee, but he'd quite forgotten it was there. He was Thinking.

Hermione had been looking up all the names she could find that might contain the initials "R.A.B." They had agreed it was someone that Voldemort at least had a passing acquaintance with, so she was

looking at everyone he might have known in the Ministry and Hogwarts prior to his first downfall, and everyone in the Order whom they could find by name. She'd found, in essence, nothing. Granted, there were a couple of people with those initials, but the connection was so ludicrous that they were dismissed.

Someone's footsteps were in the hallway, and Harry immediately swept the objects into his lap and grabbed the mug of coffee with both hands. He lowered his head over it and tried to appear to be too distracted to look up.

"Harry?" Sirius asked in a cautious voice. "Did you just hide something from me?"

Harry looked up. "Oh. No. Well, yes, but it's only because I don't want to take a chance on Simon seeing it."

"He's in his room. Slowly going mad, I think."

Harry held the locket up by its chain. "Have I really not showed this to you, yet?"

Sirius frowned. "That's it, then? The fake?" He seemed hesitant to take it, though Harry was holding it out.

"Yeah. Thought you'd already seen it, sorry."

"I wasn't too keen to start asking you questions about anything surrounding that night, until you were ready."

Harry shrugged, and the motion looked irritated. "This is important, and I know how to compartmentalize emotion. Obviously not as well as I thought I did. Anyway, here's this, as well." He pushed the note across the table.

Sirius took it, looked at it, and blinked in a very strange, startled way. He looked at it more closely. His eyes became wide and confused.

"Harry?" he said, his voice disconcertingly small. "Why is there a note from my brother in your fake Horcrux?"

Harry shook his head. "What are you playing at, Sirius, it's from— oh. My. God!" He snatched the note back. "Are you sure? Do you recognise the handwriting? I didn't know his middle name! This can't possibly be your brother! You're absolutely sure?"

"Regulus Arcturus Black," Sirius said slowly. "I'm sure. I never knew why he was killed. I always thought of him as this useless, annoying little sycophant, and I thought Voldemort just didn't need him. I never thought he would, well, do something like this."

"He must have turned against Voldemort," Harry said in wonderment. "Voldemort can't have found out about this, or it wouldn't have still been there. He must have done something else, too, must have defied him openly."

Sirius placed his hands flat against the table and stared at them. "If I had known . . ." He looked up. "I would have— maybe I could have— I mean, I already knew how to do it, James and Lily were going into hiding!"

Harry didn't know what he could say. "You didn't know, Sirius. How could you have?"

"I could have spent less time burning bridges behind me, at least!" he growled. "If we had still been speaking—"

"Sirius," Harry said calmly. "Regulus knew whose side you were on, and he knew how well-connected you were. If he'd thought to ask anyone for help, I'm sure it would have been you. But he didn't. That's something he chose, not you."

Sirius took a few deep breaths. "Right. You're right. But I need to know why. I don't even know why he decided to do this, much less why he didn't come to me after. He should have known I would have protected him. Well, after I whalloped him first. But . . ."

"It's likely that you aren't ever going to know his reasons, Sirius. I doubt he wrote them down. Damn," Harry said in sudden disgust, "I

was hoping the fellow who did this would still be alive and interested in helping me. Hey, you don't think . . ."

Sirius shook his head firmly. "No. The Death Eaters gave his body back to the family. I wasn't invited to the funeral, nor did I have an inclination to go, but I definitely would have heard about it if they buried an empty casket."

"I didn't know you missed his funeral."

Sirius frowned. "That's because we haven't talked about him in years. Not a very appropriate subject for a ten-year-old, is it?"

"Um, you do remember how much time I spent around prostitutes when I was ten? That's not the point, anyway. I just . . . I'm sad that you didn't get the chance to say goodbye. But this helps, doesn't it? Knowing about this?"

Sirius shook his head, looking bewildered. "Not yet." He picked up the locket again. "Well, you've got a problem, don't you?"

"Who, me?"

"Yeah. How are you going to figure out if he destroyed the real one or not?"

Harry frowned in concentration, then he looked up with a yelp of triumph. "You know how many times I've heard it said that you are nothing compared to your brother, and that Regulus was a hundred times the man you are, and that while you may be a stain on the name of your house, Regulus was a paragon of virtue?"

Sirius raised his eyebrow. "I can only imagine. The damn house elf rarely says anything else when we're in the same— oh. You can't possibly be saying what I think you're saying."

Harry jumped to his feet. "If anyone alive is going to be able to tell us, it's Kreacher." Then a small, seemingly unimportant moment two years past popped into his head. "I just remembered. When we were

cleaning out the house, when we first moved here, Kreacher tried to keep a bunch of stuff.”

“And he threw an unholy tantrum when we wouldn’t let him.”

“I let him keep one thing,” Harry admitted. “Because he was actually sobbing with anger that I was going to take it away, and I just gave in. It was a locket.”

Sirius stood up from the table almost as abruptly as Harry. “He still has it? Krea—”

“No, don’t call him!” Harry said hastily. “What if he’s in the middle of something? We don’t want it to look like an emergency. We should just pop in and see if we can have him for a couple of hours.”

Sirius nodded. “Okay.”

They both nearly ran for the study’s fireplace. But when they were still in the hallway, Harry heard a weird, alarming noise from upstairs. It sounded like a siren that was slowly having its volume turned up. It was a horrible high-pitched whining sound and Sirius covered his ears with a grimace of pain.

“What is that?” he shouted.

Harry, covering his ears, shook his head in response. “I don’t know! It’s coming from upstairs, it’s— oh, no, it’s a potion!” he shrieked, and tried to run up the stairs. He only made it halfway before the solid whoompf of an explosion rocked the house, taking him off his feet and throwing him into the air.

“Harry!”

Draco glared at his mother. He struggled to keep his temper in check and his mind tightly reined in, because he had gotten awfully good at a few non-verbal curses and didn’t want to accidentally cast one on her. He narrowed his eyes and, once again, mimed writing something. His mother just looked back at him stonily.

"You are ill, Draco, and you will stay in bed and rest, do you understand?"

He gritted his teeth. Next time he woke up with a fever, he was going to keep his big mouth shut about it, he swore to himself furiously. He didn't know what on earth his mother had given him to cure his soaring temperature and aching throat, but it had removed his voice, for at least a few hours. And he didn't like not being able to speak. Not at all. That she had then proceeded to bind him into bed and was refusing to fetch him paper to communicate with, was almost nothing compared to the fact that she'd tricked him into drinking a potion that had taken his voice. He should have known better!

Angry and close to panic, he tried miming again, this time with a rude hand gesture thrown in. He was never anything but flawlessly respectful in his mother's presence, but he was at his wit's end with her.

"No," she said adamantly. "It is bad enough, Draco, that you have put us in this position. You are a turncoat and you have impoverished us and forced us to live in this situation. You are . . . you have become . . . you are blood traitor," she whispered as if in great pain. "And I am trying to live with that. But you are not making it easy for me, with this disgusting way you are trying to curry favour with Harry Potter. You spend as much time with him as you do here, if not more, and it sickens me. And now you are trying to go over there and slave away like a house elf while you are ill. And I won't allow it. I have had enough."

If Draco hadn't been bound to the bed, he might have slapped her, she sounded that much like an idiot. She was obviously living in a world of her own imagination, where she could afford to be arrogant and ignore the obligations they had to their hosts. Draco was either smarter than his mother or just less deluded, but he was almost shocked by the way she was blathering on like their entire life hadn't changed. And now she was calling him a turncoat and a blood traitor? He was enraged. Maybe he was a turncoat. Maybe. But he didn't see how refusing to allow Fenrir Greyback to feast on children made him a blood traitor.

Besides, this was urgent, for Merlin's sake. He didn't have time for her dramatics.

Accio parchment! he thought with desperation. Accio quill!

The objects zoomed into the room, eliciting a shriek from his mother, and he snatched them up, furiously scribbling down his note and thrusting it at her until she agreed to take it.

Stop being a hysterical bitch and let me up! There is a potion at Harry's that should have been checked an hour ago and I can't because you stuck me in this stupid bed!

She was about to respond, looking down at him very coldly, but the door to his room banged against the wall and made her shriek again. There stood Potter, looking extremely grim, with blood dripping down the side of his face and his clothes looking rather singed.

"What," he began in a quiet, and very scary, voice, "just happened?"

Draco winced. He snatched the note from his mother and held it out to Potter, who took it curiously, and immediately turned to Draco's mother with his eyebrows raised.

"He is very ill, and he needs to be in bed," she sniffed, and then glided from the room without another word.

Draco growled and strained against the invisible restraints on his body. He hadn't mastered the art of non-verbally getting free of this charm—it was specifically tailored by the mothers of sick children. Potter held out his wand, and Draco closed his eyes, expecting to be hexed into oblivion as revenge. Instead, nothing happened at all, and he opened his eyes to see Potter giving him an amused, lopsided smile.

"I can see that this wasn't exactly your fault."

Draco nodded vigorously.

“Finite Incantatum,” Potter intoned, and Draco was free. He stood up cautiously. “Guilty or no, you’re going to come back to the house with me and try to sort out the mess. I wasn’t about to try to clean it up when I didn’t even know what it was.”

Draco sighed and nodded.

“Did she use a tongue-tying curse on you or something?”

Potion, Draco mouthed with exaggerated movements. He clutched his throat and winced.

Potter chuckled as he led the way out of the room. “Maybe she’ll tell me what it was. I kind of like you when you can’t talk.”

Draco tried to swat the other teenager in the back of the head, then remembered Potter had a head injury and tried to stop himself. Not that it mattered. He had spun around and grabbed hold of his wrist to prevent the blow. Draco made a face.

Show off, he mouthed. Then a thought struck him. He exaggerated the movement Potter had just made, and gestured at himself, raising his eyebrows in question.

“You want to learn this stuff?”

Draco nodded.

Potter snorted. “Fat chance. I’m already uncertain about dueling you, see. I am not stupid enough to teach you how to fight me physically as well.”

Draco wanted to argue, but the little whuffing noise he managed to make wasn’t particularly eloquent. Besides, Potter had a point.

As he walked, Potter clutched at his side and groaned. “Bruised my ribs,” he muttered. “Got knocked off the stairs.”

Draco let out a wheezy little laugh, which he unfortunately couldn’t explain. He just remembered that Potter had explained the injuries

he'd arrived with (when he was still Evan) by saying he'd fallen down the stairs at home. He didn't see how Potter managed to sustain so many wounds from the perfectly traditional staircase at Grimmauld Place when the enchanted moving stairs at Hogwarts had never given him any trouble.

Of course, he shouldn't have laughed, because he got punched in the side and ended up doing some groaning and rib-prodding of his own.

They came into the Tonks' sitting room to find that Narcissa was sitting there with her nose turned up and pretending to pay no attention at all to Professor Black. Black, meanwhile, was explaining to Andromeda and Ted that he would like to take Kreacher back to help clean up from the Potions accident.

"He's your elf, Sirius," Andromeda said in exasperation. "You can have him whenever you need him."

Black frowned down at the little elf, who was glaring right back at him. He obviously was not in favour of going with the professor, rather than remaining with the only living member of the Black family who had not got her name blasted off the family tree. Draco could hardly blame him.

"He's got his own mind, hasn't he?" Black said grudgingly. Such as it is, thought Draco. "But Kreacher, we do need your help."

Kreacher puffed up with pride at that.

"You're sure Harry's all right, now?" Ted asked. "We can take a look at him. Goodness knows we've had enough experience with minor injuries after raising Dora."

"I'm fine," Potter said to announce his presence. "I've got some things at home that will fix me up— well, I hope I've things at home." He turned to Draco. "Think anything from the laboratory can be salvaged?"

Draco shrugged, as it was the best he could do without being able to speak. His mother was glaring at both boys, but Potter was so good

at ignoring her that Draco tried to do the same. He made to follow Black and Potter and his mother decided to rekindle her irrational maternal fit.

“Where do you think you are going, young man?”

The hell with it, I’m of age anyway, he decided, grinding his teeth, and turned his back on her. Then he pulled up, startled, when he realised he couldn’t call out his destination. But Potter saw his problem and yanked him into the fire as it began to suck him in, and they managed to squeeze together close enough that they both survived the journey.

They did jump apart as soon as they landed on the other side, of course. Black was standing there with his mouth open to say something that Draco was quite certain he did not want to hear. He was saved from hearing it by Potter’s fist in the older man’s gut, which apparently made him think the better of commenting. It just made Draco wish again that he knew how to do that.

It was nearly an hour before Draco and Harry were able to wade into the laboratory itself, as they had to repair the stairs and clean out a path through the heavy spattering of slightly pulsating gray gunk. It was another hour and a half before they were sure that the volatile substances were contained or removed. Luckily, Draco was a fastidious brewer. All his supplies were tightly sealed and the entire room covered by Cushioning Charms that he renewed every day, so nothing had been broken or loosed to mix with the mess that had blown out of the cauldron.

When Harry was sure that the walls were not going to melt and the house was not going to catch on fire, he decided they had earned a quick break. He had grown hot from the work and stripped his shirt off an hour ago, and he now used the shirt to wipe the gunk off the two work stools that remained usable—reflecting (with remorse, as he hated shopping) that he would have to buy some new clothes soon, since he was apt to use them this way. He sank down on one with a sigh and gave Draco a lopsided smile. After identifying the ingredients they were cleaning up, Draco hadn’t been terribly helpful,

since he was struggling to master cleaning charms non-verbally. At least he hadn't blown the place up for a second time.

He frowned. Draco was very sweaty and grayish-looking.

"Can you talk yet?"

"Yes, I think so. Oh. Yes." His voice was hoarse and barely there. He winced and swallowed audibly.

"So you actually are sick." Harry had wondered, just a little.

Draco rolled his eyes. "My mother might be a bit over-protective, but she's not crazy enough to make that up," he rasped.

"Says the person who called her a hysterical bitch."

Draco closed his eyes and swallowed again, wincing. "She's going to kill me when I get back. I really don't have the energy for her right now."

"So don't go back yet," Harry suggested.

"Obviously not. There's still a good hour of work left to do in here, not to mention the corridor."

"Which you are in no shape to do," Harry observed. He got up and shuffled the bottles on the shelf of finished products, hoping Draco had decided to brew some potions to treat fever.

"Here, what are you doing, Potter? Just tell me what you're looking for, I'll know where it is."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I was going to give something to you, you dolt. You know, because you're sick? Although now I'm thinking I might just pop in on your mum and see if she's got any of that voice-removing stuff left."

Draco just glared at him.

“Look, just take something and go lie down for a while,” Harry ordered him. “You’re just going to screw things up in here if you try to work.”

Draco drew himself up haughtily and opened his mouth. Then he closed it, selected a bottle off the shelf, and retreated from the room. Harry considered the matter settled, and went to find Sirius and Kreacher.

He didn’t have to look hard, since they were just finishing up cleaning the hallway and the rest of the stairs. Harry was slightly stunned to see Sirius cleaning, but he had just as much interest in making sure the house didn’t melt as Harry, to be fair.

“Oh, good,” he said with a slight groan. “I thought I still had hours of work to do.”

“And what happened to your chipper little sidekick?”

Harry fought back his laughter. “Oh, please, call him that to his face. I want to be there to see it.”

Sirius just rolled his eyes.

“I sent him to rest. He looks awful.”

Sirius spoke in a very low voice. “Have we considered the possibility that he did this on purpose? To try to kill us, or you at least?”

Harry shrugged. “It did cross my mind, but . . .” He reached into his pocket for the piece of parchment he’d tucked away when Draco wasn’t looking, and handed it to Sirius. “He was actually trying to get here and prevent it, I think.”

Sirius frowned at the paper. “You have to be absolutely certain. He can’t stay here if you aren’t.”

“I am.”

“Okay,” Sirius said slowly, handing the note back. Then a lazy grin broke across his face. “Did you, by any chance, get to see her face when she read that?”

Harry laughed. “Yes.”

“I have to see it. We need to borrow that Pensieve from— oh, right. I suppose . . . well, I wonder who has it?”

Harry’s smile fell. “I think Neville got most of his things. He gave me a lot of his library, but Neville got the personal effects and everything. Well, not the money, obviously, that went into the scholarship fund. But Neville’s probably got it.”

Sirius put an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Harry, you don’t have to be upset every time Dumbledore comes up in conversation. He had a good life, and there’s no reason not to remember him with happiness.”

Harry nodded. “Well, except the part where he abandoned me to an abusive foster home and called it for my own good,” he said dryly. “Although I was willing to accept he didn’t know and work around that.”

Sirius’ arm had tightened up around him. “Wonder how their new life is working out for them. Do you think it’s terrible?”

“You don’t have to sound so eager!” Harry laughed.

“Is it too much to hope that they’re miserable?”

Harry shook his head. “Me, I just don’t care. I have bigger problems than annoying relatives.”

Sirius sobered up at that. “True.”

They both looked down at Kreacher.

“Come down to the kitchen, Kreacher,” Harry said quietly. “I have to ask you a question. Well, after I get a shirt, anyway.”

The three of them went down together, and Sirius and Harry cast several wards each to be sure that Draco and Simon would hear nothing. Mostly for Simon's sake. Draco knew better than to push his luck, by now.

"Have a seat, Kreacher," Harry said roughly.

Kreacher plopped down in a chair, looking distinctly displeased.

"We need to talk about Regulus."

Kreacher immediately panicked. "They cannot make Kreacher speak, no they can't—"

"Actually, I can," Harry cut him off. "I don't like to, as you may have noticed. You and I have tried to get along, and I hate ordering you to do anything. But I will. This is too important not to. Will you tell me what you know?"

Kreacher threw himself down on the floor and began screaming. "Won't, won't, won't—"

"Kreacher!" Sirius shouted, getting up and glaring down on the elf.

"No, Sirius," Harry said firmly, getting up himself. "Kreacher, stop screaming!"

The house elf was forced to comply, but he continued to pound his tiny fists and feet against the floor and there were tears streaming down his crooked old face. Harry was hopelessly at a loss for what to do. He felt cold at the idea that he could order Kreacher to do something he was so loathe to do. But he could.

"Kreacher," he said quietly. "I want to help Regulus. I know what he did. I want to finish his task. Will you help me do that?"

The wizened old creature raised up his tear-stained face and stared at Harry.

“Let’s all sit back down, shall we?”

By the time the story was finished, Sirius had sunk deeply inside himself and didn’t seem to notice where he was or who he was with. Kreacher had been alternately implacable and distraught, having to be coaxed along by Harry at every pause. But finally, they knew everything, and they had not forced Kreacher into it. Harry would have been perfectly happy, if not for the way Sirius sat there with his arms crossed and his eyes disconnected from what he was seeing.

Harry made Kreacher use a handkerchief to wipe his tear-streaked, snot-slimed face, then bade him to get the locket from its hiding place and bring it to him. Kreacher was willing to give him the locket, but rather more dubious about the handkerchief.

“This is not clothes, is it?” he asked suspiciously. “Master Harry is not to be tricking Kreacher into shameful freedom because of his failure?”

Harry was exasperated. “I told you, you didn’t fail, you did great. And I’m not giving it to you, I’m only loaning it.”

Kreacher then complied with the request to clean himself up. “Master Harry will be destroying the locket according to the wishes of Master Regulus?” he confirmed, his voice hopeful.

“Yes, Kreacher. If you bring it to me.”

Kreacher trotted off to do that, and Sirius slumped in his seat the second that the house elf was out of the room.

“Sirius? You okay?”

Sirius buried his face in his arms and dropped his head to the table. His body began to shake.

“Sirius,” Harry said with alarm, coming around the table and putting his hands on the man’s shoulder. “Talk to me.”

“All this time— I’ve thought— the worst of him!” Sirius gasped. He was weeping. “Thought he was a coward. Weak. Never thought about him at all, mostly.” He was sobbing in earnest, and his speech was almost too broken to understand. “All this time. But he was brave. He wanted— wanted to stop— I could have— should have— been there for him.” He reached one arm around to grasp Harry’s hand on his shoulder, clinging to it desperately. “You and I— you would have had a family. I’m sorry.”

Harry hauled Sirius up off the table so he could look him in the eye. “You’ve been my family, and you’ve been good at it. What happened to Regulus is sad, but it wasn’t your fault. Don’t you get that?”

“Yeah, I do,” Sirius managed to say, but then another few tears squeezed out of his eyes. “But it is my fault that I never knew my brother well enough to miss him when he was gone.”

Harry just gripped his shoulder. After a moment, he held out the used handkerchief with a mischievous expression. Sirius barked out a laugh and waved the thing away.

“Ah, what would I do without you, Harry?”

“Go crazy, probably. What is taking Kreacher so . . . long . . .”

The elf was standing in the doorway with the locket in his hand. He’d been standing there quite some time. There was a new expression on his face when he looked at Sirius. Harry couldn’t figure out what it was until he realised it wasn’t much of anything. It was just so weird that Kreacher wasn’t expressing his usual deep loathing and contempt.

Harry reached out his hand. “May I see that now?”

Kreacher passed it over wordlessly.

Harry felt it as soon as the object touched his hand. It was as if the locket weighed more than its appearance indicated, but he didn’t think it was actually heavy. He felt a pulse of power, of a seriously twisted power. He almost threw the locket across the room to get it

away from himself, but instead he clutched it closer to him. It made him shudder with revulsion, but he gripped it tight, now that he had it.

“I’m going to call Hermione. She should be here for this.”

He held onto it while he called her. He would take no chances. If this locket got away from him, it would happen because somebody killed him and took it from his death grip.

“I have it, Hermione.”

“Do you mean . . . well, the real one?”

“Yes.”

“Where was it?”

“I’ll tell you when you get here. You can come now, right?”

“Yes. I’ll need a minute, I have to call my parents and tell them where I’m going. I’ve been very careful that someone knows where I should be, you see. Anyway, I’ll Apparate over as soon as I talk to them.”

Harry was grateful that she realised how important it was not to speak about it aloud over such a tenuous connexion, when anyone might be listening. He still kept the locket in his grasp while he waited for her. He found Sirius again, and was informed that Draco had been sent back to his mother’s abundantly loving care, and that Tonks was coming to pick up Simon to visit the werewolves.

“I don’t want anyone else here . . . just in case.”

Harry nodded, heavily preoccupied. He was about to finally embark on this last step of the journey, and he found himself inexplicably nervous. What if it didn’t work, or if he couldn’t do it? What if they didn’t find the other Horcruxes, after this one? Maybe there would be a wizard powerful enough to hold Voldemort down, but he would never die until these things were destroyed. His resilience was too much for any system to take down. Harry had to be able to do this, and it had to start immediately, before it was too late. He retrieved

some of the basilisk venom, and thought that the best thing to do would be to completely submerge the locket in the liquid. As soon as his girlfriend arrived.

He played with the locket absently while he waited for Hermione, rubbing his thumb over its tarnished old surface. He dangled it from its chain, watched it spin. Then he hooked his fingernail under the edge and prised it open. A strange swirling of mist surrounded the locket, and he dropped it with a gasp, afraid that it was cursed, like the ring, that it would wither his hand and kill him, but it couldn't be because the mist was coalescing into figures, into people, and . . .

"Mum? Dad?"

The two faces turned toward him. Their eyes were red, and Harry bit back a cry of panic.

"Harry."

"Um, are you ghosts? Not that I'm not happy to see you, but . . ."

"You should not be. We are not happy to see you," the James-mist said.

"Oh. I see."

"Tsk ts," the Lily figure clucked. "Sirius never told you, did he?"

"What?"

"That you were an accident, Harry. That we didn't plan on having children, and certainly not you . . ."

"No, I guess he didn't tell me that," Harry said flatly. He was fairly certain this was some kind of trick—it was a Horcrux, after all—but he was so interested in these figures. They looked so like his parents. He couldn't pass up the opportunity to talk to them, even if it wasn't real.

“He wouldn’t, would he?” James said with a chuckle. “He’s always been dishonest like that. After all, he’s made you think he loves you, hasn’t he? He wouldn’t tell you that he only keeps you out of loyalty to me.”

Harry bristled at that. “Now, that I know isn’t true.”

“Oh, Harry,” Lily said, almost compassionately. “You don’t think he would have much preferred to have his own life? He had plans, of course, that didn’t include you. So did we. But there you were, and we couldn’t just kill you. That would be . . . wrong. But we certainly didn’t want you.”

“We know you, Harry. We know how you are. You pretend you don’t care, but you desperately crave to be loved, don’t you? And yet, no one does. So sad, little Harry, so unloved . . . everyone resenting him . . .”

“Hermione loves me,” Harry said firmly.

Lily laughed at that, a far more unpleasant sound than Harry would have expected. “You think so? She can tell you herself what she thinks of you.”

“No,” Harry said automatically, but it was too late because a Hermione figure was already rising up from the locket and forming between his parents.

“Oh, Harry.”

“You’re not the real Hermione,” he said dismissively. “She’s on her way here right now.”

“I am connected to the real Hermione,” the figure said. “I know her mind, as I know her body. You can hardly deny that I am like her.”

As if to prove it, a swirl of that special ink-and-flowers smell wafted to him, and he was arrested by it.

"You think I love you, Harry, but it's not you I love. It's everyone else. Don't you see? You are a dangerous creature, and I have to keep you under control. I won't say that I like having this duty, but someone has to protect the world from you. You'd be a Dark Lord if it weren't for me. I don't love you, Harry, I'm afraid of you. I know what you'll become, and I'm especially afraid that you'll be too powerful for me to kill when you get out of my control . . . you know it will happen, Harry, you know how Dark you are even now."

Harry was frozen by her words. He'd tried not to listen, but it seemed so real, and so very plausible. Hadn't she just said, only days ago, much this same thing. She'd never said it this plainly before, but it was true . . .

He moaned, feeling sick.

"Do you think that, too?" he asked, looking up at his father. "Do you think that will happen?"

"We knew when you were born that you were a freak," his mother answered.

"We had hoped you'd die in the attack. You never have done what you're supposed to do, boy."

Maybe it was the way they said "boy" and "freak" the way the Dursleys had done. Maybe it was just the confirmation that Hermione was right. But Harry stopped arguing then, just wrapped his arms around himself and stared at them in horror as they listed his shortcomings.

"Never making friends . . ."

"Rebellious . . ."

"Weak . . ."

"Running away, hiding, not facing your problems . . ."

“Ordering people around like you own them . . . that poor Malfoy boy, that poor elf, even dear Sirius who’s had to put up with so much from you already . . .”

“Don’t even know how dangerous you are . . . how much I fear you when I’m letting you touch me . . .”

Harry choked.

Then someone slapped him so hard it made his ears ring.

He scrambled up from his seat, gasping for breath and shaking his head violently. He lost sight of the locket-people and saw the real Hermione standing right in front of him, her hands on her hips and squarely facing her constructed self from the locket.

“How dare you use my face to tell him such things?” she hissed furiously. She picked up the locket, making the forms wail in panic, and dropped it into the vial of venom making them disappear entirely. She gave it a vigorous shake for good measure, then threw it aside and turned to Harry. Her eyes were blazing.

“You were listening to all that rot?”

Harry blinked, not knowing about the tears welled up in his eyes until the blinking made them spill out. “You said it, just a few days ago. You said that you were afraid of what I would do if you weren’t there. You said I needed you.”

Hermione looked furious. “I did not say that! I said I was afraid of what would happen to you, you dolt. I know how hard you push yourself and how much responsibility you give yourself, and I was afraid that you’d drive yourself right into the grave if I wasn’t there to take care of you. Don’t you get it? I don’t think any of that nonsense from the locket. I think that you’re so good at heart that you’ll kill yourself for the world! You need me to help you!”

“But Hermione,” he mumbled. “You know it’s true, you know how easy it would be for me to turn Dark. You really don’t stay close because of what I might do.”

"Listen to me very closely," she said, stepping just the barest inch away from him and turning her face up with a scowl. "You don't scare me, Chosen Boy."

Then she kissed him. It was not a gentle kiss, and it was not a chaste kiss. It was not any kind of kiss that they had shared before. It was the kind of kiss that in any other circumstance would have immediately led to much more. It was deep and demanding and completely passionate. Harry was caught quite off guard, but it was only a second before he was fulfilling his end of things. When they finally broke apart, it was mostly because they were out of breath.

"You hear me? I'm not afraid of you," Hermione panted, her cheeks red with the remnants of anger and exertion.

Harry put his hands on her waist and kept her against him. "Good." He sighed deeply, a smile on his face and his hands keeping her very firmly in place.

She looked up at him with confusion, then made a disgusted face. "Men!" she huffed. "One little kiss and you've forgotten all about it."

"That was not little. You've never kissed me like that before."

"I've never kissed anyone like that before," she said.

"Well, that just proves the point, doesn't it? You do love me."

"Of course I do. Haven't I told you that about a thousand times?"

"You can't love someone you're afraid of," he said with assurance, resting his cheek on her head.

"I would imagine it would be difficult," she sniffed.

"Thank you for destroying the locket for me."

"Well, I wasn't just going to let you do the whole thing without me."

“I love you, Hermione,” he said with great calm and sincerity. It took away her irritable responses. She just leaned against him more comfortably.

“I know.”

“Hermione?”

“What?”

“Any chance we could do that again?”

She sighed and burrowed her head into his chest. “Later.”

Chapter Fifteen

Tonks had been rather surprised when Sirius had shown up one day to request they take Simon for a few hours. He had refused to explain why, but he was so pale as to look frightened or sick, and his eyes were red-rimmed like he'd been crying. Remus had been busy, so she'd simply agreed to take Simon with her and she'd sort it out later. She'd been shocked by Simon's attitude—it was like he'd moved both forward and back, somehow. He seemed more mature, expressing his understanding of the necessity for him to be away from the other werewolves, but he'd been so intensely withdrawn that she felt like she'd lost all the ground she'd ever gained with him. He was deeply unhappy and neither admitting nor explaining it.

So when he'd gone back to Sirius and Harry that night, she'd taken a deep breath and plunged into an argument with Remus. Those tended to be the most exhausting, infuriating experiences of her life. She'd never met a man more stubborn than Remus Lupin—even when he knew he was wrong, he wouldn't let go of an idea until someone knocked it right out of him.

So they arrived at the moment in their argument: he knew she was right that they needed some way to take Simon out of Grimmauld Place and to spend time with him. But he was so adamant about Simon's safety that he refused to come up with some way for them to safely spend time together. Usually when he got like this, she could snog him into submission, but he wasn't budging this time.

"Fine!" she finally shouted, throwing up her hands. "You don't want to work this out, then that's fine! I'll just do it myself!"

It probably had to do with Gordon. But she'd never been able to live in that cautious way, thinking that because it happened to one person, it would happen to her. In fact, she'd never been cautious at all, and she wasn't about to start now, not because of Gordon or . . . or anything.

Remus maintained his stubbornness, she thought just to make a point. Probably just that he was more level-headed or experienced than she was, or something. Which was true, but didn't make her any

less right about this. They ought to be compromising the safety issue with the issue of making Simon a part of the family before it was too late. His horror of harm coming to the boy was making him blind to Simon's ever-increasing distant attitude. She was right.

Harry and Draco had made the current batch of Wolfsbane treatment together, instead of Draco watching Harry and having it explained to him. He'd been spending so much time at brewing recently that he was beginning to recognise the principles involved in this complex potion for himself. This was the two-days-before-full-moon batch. Tomorrow, Harry was toying with the idea that Draco could deliver it by himself. He had to start doing it sometime, because it was likely that Harry wouldn't be around to help next month.

They were in the hallway, the cauldron between them, trying to make Harry's Invisibility Cloak cover both of them and the potion so they could Apparate from the front stoop without being seen.

"No, turn it back this way," Draco said in frustration. "It's not covering my legs anymore."

"Oh, hang it all, let's just go in plain sight," Harry said in disgust.

Then there was a knock on the door and they exchanged glances. It was obviously someone friendly, since Sirius had already destroyed that slip of paper with the address on it, but unexpected visitors was rarely anything good.

Harry opened the door. "Tonks? Uh, hi."

She breezed in. "Came to pick up Simon," she explained. "Has he taken his dose yet?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, we already gave it to him."

"Good," she said cheerfully. "I just thought he could use some company."

The two teenagers exchanged glances.

“What?” Then she lowered her voice and directed her speech to Harry specifically. “You told me yourself how much time he spends shut in his room. We’re worried about him. Remus wants to be at the compound to supervise this—” She waved her hand at the cauldron to indicate it “—but I thought today would be a good enough day to just get him out of the house for a while.”

Harry couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong with this, but she seemed so utterly unconcerned. He tried to brush his brain over hers to get any sense she was lying, but she was exuding a carefree attitude. And he couldn’t deny that Simon was worrying them all, a bit . . . If he wasn’t begging for some time in the practice room, he was shut up in his room with whatever he’d raided from the kitchen.

Harry shrugged. “Well, we’ve got to go,” he finally said. “We’ll see you later when you drop him off.”

Tonks nodded, professed herself to be looking forward to catching up with him and Sirius a bit, and clomped upstairs. Harry shrugged at Draco, threw the Cloak aside, and they moved out front to depart.

Sirius caught Tonks on the stairs, where she offered a similar explanation, which he saw right through.

“You two are in some kind of epic fight, aren’t you?” he sighed.

Tonks just crossed her arms stubbornly. “I’m going to take him into Muggle London, they won’t even look for us there. You know I’m right.”

“Of course I know you’re right, and so does he. But you can’t do it this way . . .”

“Already doing it, Sirius dear. Now budge up.”

He groaned and moved aside. “I’d better go over there and sort him out,” he mumbled, already heading out the door to the werewolf compound. “Tonks! If anything happens, he’s going to kill me as well as you! Just keep that in mind!”

Her laughter floated down the stairs. "All in the plan, dear!"

The werewolves looked good, Harry thought to himself as he and Draco set up the cauldron in front of their ring of cabins. A goodly number of them had jobs, and the garden they cultivated was doing very well. They were going through something of a tragedy, Harry gathered from their subdued manner, but were at least in good health.

But the sorrowful feeling of the place was getting to him, and he knew they weren't wearing those sour expressions solely because he'd brought Draco along today. It was driving him mad with curiosity and worry, and he had to know.

"Remus," he said casually, taking the older man by the arm and leading him away from the group gathered about the cauldron of their treatment. "What's going on?"

Sirius, who had appeared only a moment ago with no explanation of his presence, jogged to catch up with them. Harry gave him a nod, but turned back to Remus immediately.

Remus' face fell into deep sadness. "Do you remember Gordon?"

Harry nodded, thinking. "Blond, going gray, little heavy-set?"

Remus let out a soft breath. "Yeah."

"Something happened to him?"

"We don't know," he whispered. "He's one of us that was working, and two days ago . . . he didn't return from work. We haven't seen him, or heard anything. We know he would simply leave like that, which leaves only one possibility."

Harry bit his lip and squeezed Remus' arm. "They would have found a way to contact you if they were keeping him alive. They'd only do that if they wanted something from you. I know it hurts, but at least you know he's not being held somewhere and tortured."

Sirius, who had been walking on Remus' other side, added, "Make sure you remind Natalie of that."

Remus nodded. "I've been trying to tell myself it's better that they killed him right away. But Gordon is the first of my people that I've lost to this thing. I can't accept it, and I can't let it happen again."

"Now I know why you and Tonks are having such a fight about spending time with Simon," Sirius said, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder. He grimaced. "If I'd known about Gordon, I never would have let her go out with Simon . . ."

Remus shot Sirius a shocked look, his slow walk ceasing. "What?" Sirius closed his eyes. "She didn't even tell you, did she?"

"She said she was going over to your place to talk to him for a bit and keep him from feeling like we've forgotten about him. And I was going to join her over there as soon as Harry and Draco were finished. They left?"

"She said they were going into Muggle London. She can blend in so well, I thought they'd be fine. But if they've identified all the werewolves, they'll be able to pick out Simon, anyway."

Remus had become very pale. "You don't know where they went?"

Sirius winced as his friend's hand gripped him too hard. "No, I don't. I'm sorry, Moony."

"That woman!" Remus burst out. "I can't believe she'd do something like this! Is she an Auror or is she an idiot? She knows better!"

Sirius and Harry both held onto him.

"Easy, there," Harry cautioned.

"You don't know where they went," Sirius said in his most level voice. "I know you're not going to just wait for them to come back, but we need to think about this before we go rushing off."

Remus let loose a wild laugh. "Normally it'd be me saying that to you."

"I know. That ought to tell you what kind of state you're in. So let's come up with a plan. We can both be recognised, and probably more easily than Tonks and Simon. So that's the first thing we have to figure out . . ."

Sirius' calm words seemed to be working, and Remus, while still tense, was no longer about to leap from their hands and run off on his own. Or, he wasn't until a misty, silvery wolf came streaking across the compound, its legs flashing madly, and swirled to a stop in front of them. And spoke.

"Remus!" it said in breathless panic. "Come quick! There's six of them and I can't take them by myself!"

Draco shot a scowl at Potter's retreating back, joined as it was with the forms of the older two men. Harry was supposed to be helping him dish out this potion and keep its contents in stasis while people were waiting their turn. Instead, Draco was acting the servant to a load of werewolves while Potter went for a stroll.

One of the werewolves was following the direction of his gaze and was frowning.

"That looks serious."

Neil. The man's name was Neil, which Draco ought to remember because he was so well-liked by Lupin and Black. He was doing what he could to keep himself in the good graces of those two men, since it was every bit as important to his survival as it was to stay in Potter's good graces.

Draco shrugged. "That's Potter for you. The most fun I've ever seen him have is trying to beat Black to a pulp."

"And vice versa, I wouldn't doubt," Neil said with a little chuckle. He swallowed his dose of the potion, using one hand to hold back long

brown hair that was liberally streaked with gray. He frowned again. "I'd better go see what's afoot."

Suit yourself, Draco thought sourly. I'll just do everything myself, shall I?

Then a weird silvery shape darted to the group of four men and shouted in a voice that most improbably resembled his cousin Dora's. Who wasn't here. And weird silvery dog things could not sound like his cousin anyway.

Draco was ready to dismiss it all, but then his jaw dropped in shock as all four men barreled through the gates and let loose with the sharp cracks of Disapparation. The whole group of werewolves began to mutter and look very dire. Draco just sighed and kept his eyes on the potion. After all, someone ought to.

Tonks and Simon were very much enjoying themselves at the Muggle arcade. Tonks had made sure she picked one that she hadn't used to frequent during her earliest stint as an undercover Auror. Simon, who'd been without any type of video game for two years and had been desperately missing that part of his Muggle life, had suddenly decided they were the best of friends again.

Tonks knew that she was going about this all wrong, and her stomach was churning with guilt over this. Remus wanted them to be safe, and having Gordon go missing had made him even more strict than normal. But she was an Auror, after all, and she bloody knew what she was doing. She and Simon were wearing Muggle clothes, and she'd even let Simon do his hair up in psychotic-looking spikes that attracted absolutely zero attention. Her favourite clunky boots (that she hardly wore now that she was engaged to a man fourteen years older than her) were a common accessory around here. She happily turned her hair bubblegum pink, resolving that she'd set it back to brown before she and Simon returned to Grimmauld Place, where Remus was sure to be waiting for them and incredibly angry with her.

Her guilt wore off as they played a few games and ate the horrid food at the snack bar. Simon had warmed back up to her incredibly well. She hoped that his good mood would last a little longer, this time.

Now that he could see she and Remus were really going to put forth some effort to spend time with him, despite how busy and dangerous their lives were right now.

She didn't know how she noticed, but she figured it out right in the middle of a violent shoot-out between her and her young charge. Eyes on the back of her neck. Someone staring at her. At first she thought it was just some guy taking in her nicer assets, but the feeling didn't let up. It was her first inkling that coming here wasn't such a good idea.

"Simon," she said very softly, continuing to play the game. "Keep your eyes on the screen, but listen."

Perhaps feeling some of her tension, he only mumbled, "Okay."

"Someone's watching us."

"Shit."

"Here's what we're going to do, okay? You're going to win this game just as soon as I finish talking—" and now she was praying with all her heart that the person watching them did not have the famous WWW Extendable Ears "—and we're going to walk out of here just like nothing is wrong. I can't take care of the problem with all these Muggles around."

"But you can take care of it, can't you?" he whispered, his eyes tight and anxious as he continued to look at the screen.

"Of course. But you need to stay out of the way, okay?"

"I can help," he said with a frown.

"Simon. A month of Harry's training does not mean you're ready to face this kind of fight. You barely know which end of a wand to hold and I've never seen you land a punch yet. I'm not ragging on you, Simon. I'm just saying that you're not ready for this. I need you to let me work."

“Fine,” he grumped.

“There’s an alley right next to this building. We’ll walk into there, but you’ll duck right back out of it as soon as the other guy follows us in. I’ll take care of him.”

“All right.”

Tonks stopped shooting and seconds later was letting out a load, theatrical groan. “Oh, you got me good,” she said, slapping Simon on the back. “I can’t believe it!”

Simon did not know how to act, especially not under threat. “Um,” he mumbled.

She just kept her hand on his back and started guiding him out. “Come on, we’d better make that the last game. We’re already late getting back.”

Which was true enough, but they’d been having too much fun to notice before this trouble had cropped up. Tonks led them swiftly out of the arcade, dodging the crowd of teenagers with the ease of practice rather than any innate grace. She avoided all of the people only to slam her knee into a trash bin near the door.

“Ooo,” she moaned.

Simon, despite his tension, snickered. He’d gotten to know her quirks of clumsiness by now. All in all, it was good that he was laughing. Too much tension and the person following them would know that they were on to him. Tonks limped directly around the corner and into the alley. As soon as the hulking man came into view, she shoved Simon back out of the mouth of the alley toward the street, where lights and prying eyes ought to keep him safe.

Simon slammed into a veritable wall of bodies. “Oh,” he whispered, staring at the ring of men with huge eyes. “Oh, shit.”

“I’m in for it now,” Tonks mumbled. The bright, leering eyes of six men topped six grins—three of them with the most disgustingly

discoloured and sharpened teeth. Greyback's feral pack. Not good. She immediately sent out her Patronus to her fiancée, the only thing she could think of to do at this point, and then shouted, "Simon, come here!"

He stumbled back half-blind, looking shocked and pale.

"Behind me, now," she said tersely, and held her wand up. "Who wants to try me first?" she said with bravado, hoping it was too dark for them to see her knees knocking.

They just laughed.

There had been no words spoken between them, just a sudden rush to get out of the anti-Apparation wards, then Remus was following the trail of Tonks' Patronus (stronger for him than for them), and they were desperately jumping into the wake of his passage and hoping to end up in the same place.

Harry cracked into being beside the other men, his wand still hidden until he knew where they were. They were on the street in front of a Muggle arcade, and Harry wasn't immediately sure what they were doing there. But of course the attackers, or maybe Tonks herself, had cast notice-me-not charms all over the place by now. They might be fighting for their lives an inch in front of Harry's nose. But likely they would be . . .

"There!" Sirius barked out, rushing forward toward the dark alley. Everyone else was right at his heels, while he cast the spells that would allow them through any barrier that might have been put up. As they entered the mouth of the alley, they were suddenly able to see everything.

There was a man slumped on the ground at Tonks' feet, and she was trying to hold two other men at bay while maintaining the curse she'd placed on a fourth that was on his knees in front of her, pale and sweating and glaring at her with his teeth clenched against his screams.

“Not nice, what you’re doing to Jugson,” one of the men said with a foul smile as he danced past her spells.

“Afraid Gibbon and I are going to have to punish you for that,” the other man agreed.

“Maybe we’ll feed you to Creedy and Blake there,” Gibbon said, almost giggling.

Two dirty-looking men, presumably Creedy and Blake, had hold of Simon’s arms and were laughing with good humour at his frantic attempts to free himself. They were large, rangy, and ugly. Obviously Greyback’s wolves, and the unconscious bloke probably was another.

Simon was wild. “Leave her alone!” he raged, his feet lashing out with stunning accuracy. “You can have me, but let her go!” His foot connected with one man’s shin, and in his moment of pain, Simon jerked his arm free, which he used to elbow the man in the gut and cause him to stumble back. It was a short-lived victory, since the other man twisted both Simon’s arms up behind him and savagely bit into his shoulder. Simon screamed.

Tonks was being overcome. But there was no need to worry about that. Remus was running, flat-out running, and he launched himself on top of the man called Gibbon with a hoarse yell.

“Don’t you touch my family!” he snarled, grabbing the man by the hair and slamming his head into the dirty asphalt. Then he leapt on the second attacker, who was just staring at him with shock. They hit the ground and rolled, throwing blows and spells alike.

Sirius and Neil had quickly made sure of Tonks’ two victims, and were now dueling the man who had been holding Simon (either Creedy or Blake, though the man himself was likely the only one who cared). Simon, free of his captor, stumbled toward Tonks and fell into her arms. But the other werewolf was about to throw himself into the fight.

“I could use some help, Blake!” the one dueling Sirius and Neil shouted. Creedy, then.

“Expelliarmus!” Harry shouted, taking Blake’s wand quickly. The werewolf just bared his teeth and began rushing at Harry.

Harry was carrying the Elder Wand. He had decided to begin using it to get an affinity for it, and he’d expected to use it for nothing more than simple work today. He certainly hadn’t anticipated this. And he was certainly not going to lose it if Blake had designs that way. He shoved it back into his arm holster, dropping Blake’s on the ground and stomping on it to break it.

Blake howled, pausing in shock at the sight of the splintered ends of his wand. Then he rushed forward again. Harry waited. Blake lunged forward, swinging one of his huge, long arms like he was going to sweep Harry’s head right from his shoulders.

Harry moved by instinct, each thing a separate piece and yet still all part of the same graceful destruction.

He ducked under Blake’s punch, and grabbed hold of the swinging arm. He turned, while Blake barreled on. He yanked upward sharply while he planted his feet. He could both hear and feel the snapping of Blake’s arm. Harry placed his other hand and twisted again, both splintering the bone and dislocating the shoulder. Blake went mostly limp. Harry wanted to be sure. Holding Blake by the hair, he slammed the man’s face into the wall a few times.

Harry dropped Blake’s moaning form.

A spell shot past his shoulder.

His Shield Charm slammed into place with a speed bred into him by countless ambushes from the DL.

He turned and saw that Sirius and Neil were still trying to bring down Creedy. Creedy had backed up almost into Harry, but Sirius and Neil were too focused to concern themselves with Harry’s safety. They trusted him to take care of himself.

And so Harry did. His shields were barely enough to block out the flying spells, but he remained silent . He dodged and ducked and crept his way forward until he was directly behind Creedy. Then he wrapped his right arm around the man's throat and locked it there by gripping his right wrist with his left hand.

Creedy's eyes bugged out and he windmilled his arms, trying to get at Harry and free himself. His spells immediately ceased. Harry used his foot to hook Creedy's ankle and yank his leg out from under him, pulling him backward with the straining arm over his throat. Creedy fell back on him, and Harry went down on his knees, leaning back, never loosening his hold. He sank down to the pavement, almost as if he wanted to cradle the other man's head in his lap. But he stayed in a crouch, and kept the leverage he needed to maintain his grip. Creedy's arms flopped, then twitched, and finally stilled.

Harry cautiously released his hold before he actually killed the man. He was unconscious, and his throat was so bruised that he'd be in a complete panic when he woke up. Harry cast a Body Bind on both of the two men with quick efficiency.

Sirius and Neil had watched this all with surprise, and now they all turned to Remus. He'd gotten the upper hand on the as-yet-unnamed man who'd been attacking Tonks, long since. He'd also cast aside his wand. He was simply beating the man slowly to death.

"Remus," Neil attempted. "Stop!"

The man was fixed on what he was doing, eyes frantic with fear and rage.

"Remus!" Sirius roared.

Remus looked up, seeming confused. The other two men reached down and hauled him away from the slightly mangled man moaning beneath him. He allowed himself to be lifted up and set on his feet, a safe distance from his victim. He finally saw Tonks and Simon standing there, arms around one another and watching him silently.

He looked down at his own blood-spattered hands with horror. He made a vain attempt to wipe them on his shirt. Then he fell right onto his arse on the ground, making no effort to stop himself, and just sat there, breathing heavily and staring at his hands.

Tonks approached. "Remus, it's okay now."

"Dora?" he said, as if he didn't know it was her.

She knelt down beside him. He recoiled. She cautiously took one of his hands and looked at it. "Oh, dear, your hand is all torn," she said in a quiet, sympathetic voice. "You'll have to get it fixed up."

He nodded dumbly. "Dora, are you all right?" he asked. "You and Simon—are you hurt?"

"No, darling," she said tenderly, kissing his raw knuckles. "Thank you for coming."

"I didn't even think . . . they were hurting you. Hurting my family."

"I know."

Neil stepped forward. "Let's get this situation contained, all right?" he said brusquely. "Tonks, you need to get in touch with your office and get some Obliviators out here, there had to be at least a few Muggles who saw us fighting. We need a whole squad of Aurors out here to make these arrests."

His no-nonsense tone seemed to wake Remus up, and Tonks let him go so that they could deal with the aftermath of their fight. Rufus Scrimgeour himself came down to oversee the arrests and get Tonks' report, and told them all good work in a rather disbelieving tone. Well, who would believe that a schoolteacher, a teenagers, and two unemployed misfits could take down six Death Eaters, with or without one of his top Aurors?

And he really didn't like Harry. The young man was cajoling and steadying his shaken friends, and answering the Aurors' questions, dealing with the now-arriving press . . . not seeming to care that he

was in danger just by being in public. Scrimgeour was beginning think his rival in the next election was not to be Amelia Bones.

They declined the suggestion of medical attention, believing (and rightly so) that the hospital was less help and more exposure to a second attack. They went back to Grimmauld Place to sort themselves out, knowing that their injuries from the scuffle were minor enough to be treated by Draco's stock.

Draco was there when they arrived, working in the room that had ceased to be a makeshift temporary solution and more like an actual Potions lab. He stood up from a stool as the group tramped in, eyes wide with shock.

"What were you lot doing?" he asked in awe.

"Fighting," Tonks said grimly. "And get used to this sight, that's what we keep you around for, cousin."

They all said that Simon should be treated first, but Draco was not a Healer and was really only useful in being able to quickly locate the supplies he'd laid up. Harry stepped in to treat Simon's ravaged shoulder, familiar with this scenario. Sirius had scrupulously avoided werewolf bites during his stint as guardian in Austria, but he'd been bitten by vampires enough. Simon should have relaxed as he basked in safety and the relief of pain, but Harry could feel that he was still wound up tight.

"What's wrong?" he murmured, hearing the others talking amongst one another and hoping Simon would be honest in this small window of privacy.

"I know you have things to do, but I need to learn how to fight. Soon."

"Ah," Harry said, patting his good shoulder. "I don't think you'll get any arguments. Sirius will teach you."

Tonks went next. She'd been struck by something that left burns streaking across her lower ribcage, her knee was badly bruised, and there were claw marks on her calf that she wanted cleaned out in

case they got infected. Harry and Draco dispatched her quickly, and also made short work of Neil's minor burn, which looked like Tonks' but grazed his hip and thigh. Sirius had been subjected to some kind of cutting curse, which had opened several gashes on his face. Harry closed them quickly and Draco surrendered some of his supply of dittany, but it seemed likely to scar. His friends were dismayed on his behalf. Far from caring, Sirius thought that was great news.

"It matches my collection, see," he joked, fingering a savage leftover from a vampire bite on his neck, and tracing several long remnants of werewolf claws down his forearm. "I'd show you the rest, but our relationship isn't that serious yet," he said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively at Neil.

Harry strongly suspected he was more bothered by the possibility of scars on his cheeks that he was letting on, but it was something he wouldn't care to discuss until he and Harry were alone.

And then came Remus. They'd left him for last, because he was a mess. His scraped knuckles were the least of his worries. One of his ankles was hot and swollen, his face had turned into a lumpy, red-purple mask, and he was bleeding from myriad small scrapes. He'd also been hit by a curse that had caused oozing welts to spring up all along his arms and chest. It took all of them to figure out how to treat that. Remus sat there placidly while they worked on him, so quiet and withdrawn that Harry was afraid he was thinking something stupid. Up to Tonks to sort him out, he decided. That was her job, now.

"All right, Potter, enough with the heroics," Draco snipped when Tonks led Remus downstairs. "Your turn."

Harry frowned, and began patting himself down. "Uh . . ."

Draco stared at him. In fact, so did Simon, Neil, and Sirius.

Harry didn't have a mark on him.

Remus sat on the couch, curled up to Tonks' chest, and trembled. "I'd forgotten," he muttered. "I'd forgotten what this was like. I haven't been in a fight like that since I was twenty years old."

Tonks, still riding a high of fear and adrenaline, giggled a bit hysterically. "I just finished Auror training and started doing all this fighting when I was twenty."

Remus made a face. "You really do love to point out the discrepancy in our ages."

"I'm only beating you to it," she said, kissing him softly on the forehead. "You make enough fuss about it."

He grasped her hand, far too hard. "Dora," he said fervently. "When I saw the danger you were in . . . I couldn't think anymore. I was so afraid. I don't even know what happened. I thought I was afraid, and then I was tussling with that man and beating him like I was some kind of savage . . . what have I done?"

"You saved me," she said quietly, wincing as her hand began to throb. "I would have died if you hadn't come."

"But what I did to him . . ."

"You beat him up, Remus. So what? You could have done it with a wand, and instead you did it with your fists. Either way, you did what was necessary to put a stop to what he was doing."

"I can't see it that way."

"That's because you're afraid of yourself, and I'm not."

"You're not afraid of anything," he said with a distinctly sour note in his voice.

"Don't," she said sternly. "Just don't."

"How could you, Dora? You just took Simon out like there was nothing wrong. You knew that you could have been in danger, and you acted like it didn't matter."

"I can't live like that!" she snapped. "I can't sit and wait for the apocalypse to land on my doorstep! If it comes, I'd rather it came while I was out there, living my life!"

Remus dropped his eyes to his mending hands. "So you think that I'm a coward?"

"No," she said. "I think you've got a lot of demands on you and that you're doing an admirable job of meeting them. But it can't last forever, and I'm afraid that you're losing touch with things outside the compound. You promised that you were working so hard at getting the laws changed because you wanted you and the other werewolves to become more integrated into society. But you're drawing away, instead."

"Am I?" he said quietly. "I'm sorry, Dora. I know I am. I just . . . there are so many people depending on me, and I want to keep them safe. The Death Eaters aren't the only enemies we have." There were tears in his eyes. "I've been fighting to be treated like a human for a long time. I was so tired, and so close to giving up, before I met you. You're the reason I kept going. And now I have to find the strength to keep up the hope of all those other people. Now we're in this war, and every step forward we make is nulled by reports of Greyback's men, and it seems hopeless . . . it's gotten easier to retreat."

"Easier doesn't make it right," she said, but she was clinging to him, taking the sting from her words with the embrace. They weren't arguing, and she wasn't having to talk him out of a deep depression in which he believed he was a monster. They were making progress.

"No, it doesn't. If I forgive you for turning the rest of my hair gray, will you forgive me for being selfish?"

She snuggled into him. "I suppose I have to. For the baby's sake."

With a contented sigh, he laid his cheek in her hair. Then his arms stiffened around her. "What did you say?"

"Despite Auntie Narcissa being so disapproving of you, I think she'll be rather disappointed that we have to rush the wedding."

He pulled back and stared at her. "The wedding? Baby?"

She nodded, her lips trembling as she tried to hold back her tears. She wasn't ready for this, she really wasn't, she was only twenty-three and she still had years in which to make mistakes and cause mayhem before she settled down, but she loved him so much that it made her feel like she was tearing in half . . .

"I'm pregnant, Remus. Are you going to make an honest woman of me, or aren't you?"

He gaped at her, his mouth open in shock. She felt her tears beginning to leak out. Merlin, she hated crying. His hand rose up to cup her cheek, smearing her tears.

"Don't cry," he mumbled, still in shock. "You're . . . we're going to have a baby?"

"Yes."

He cupped her face with hands gone strangely gentle, staring at her. A light began to glow behind his eyes, and the corners of his lips curved up.

"I have never met a woman more honest than you are," he proclaimed. "But I'd like to marry you anyway."

"How's next week?"

"Next week?"

"It would be nice to have a honeymoon before I'm too far along to enjoy it."

He glanced down at her flat belly, but his hands were still on her face. "Good point."

They sealed it with a kiss, and the past weeks of fear and arguments and hurt simply disappeared.

Barty Crouch had lived a great deal of his life in misery. Misery, he was finding out, conditioned one to receiving disappointments but did little to prepare one for experiencing abject fear. Which he was currently experiencing. The perks of being one of the most trusted servants of the Dark Lord were counterbalanced by several rather large drawbacks. The aftermath of delivering bad news, for example, had never been good.

Their master was not here yet, and Barty caught Severus staring at him from his place in the corner. He was gloating over the fact that it was not his turn, somewhere under that implacable exterior. He wouldn't be so calm if he had to be the one to tell their master what had happened . . . Barty focused on his anger against Severus Snape. It did some to lessen the trembling that had set in.

He had to be the one to tell, because he was the one who had issued the orders. It would have been Bellatrix, but she had said that no one was so stupid as to make such a public appearance, and that it was obviously a trap. But Barty had thought he was so smart . . . Said six of them ought to be able to fight it out. Do damage, if nothing else. And since the only allies he believed that their target had were werewolves, he'd been certain that sending three of Greyback's men would do the trick.

He'd been so eager to tell their master what he'd done for him. It would be such a huge blow to the morale of the enemy to lose a woman and a child. It would prove that none of them were safe, so much more clearly than Greyback tearing apart that fool Gordon. But there was nothing to be eager about now.

Death Eaters were always composed, always restrained (except Bellatrix, who hardly counted), and they never showed fear. They couldn't afford to appear weak in front of one another, because they knew all too well that the others would exploit their weakness—knew it because they would do it if the situation were reversed. But Barty was beyond that, now. He had to tell the Dark Lord just how badly he had failed, and the punishment to follow would be . . . beyond comprehension.

Barty put his head down and breathed heavily, trying not to throw up. Bellatrix was almost laughing, while at her side, her husband sneered at Barty. Lucius was just giving him a cold look. But Severus abruptly stood up and left the room. Can't even be in the same room as a little weakness? Barty thought to himself. He'd never know that Snape had left because he entertained thoughts of trying to save the man and was ill at the thought that there was nothing he could do.

Seconds later, their master strode into the room, his usual regal bearing in place. He swept his eyes over them. "Where is Severus?" he asked peevishly.

"Left for a moment," Yaxley volunteered.

The Dark Lord's eyes swept the room, and came to rest on Barty. "What has happened?"

He was breathing heavily, and he was pale, and sweaty, and shaking . . . he stood up, held up his head, and steadied himself. He would face this punishment with dignity. He had failed, and he deserved this, but it didn't mean he had lost his pride completely.

"I have failed you, my lord," he murmured. And he spilled out the story of discovering Nymphadora Tonks and Simon Billings on their own, of sending Jugson and the rest to take them, and then stumbled his way through the outcome of that attack.

His master took a deep breath, causing his odd, slitted nostrils to flare. He was holding back his ire, but Barty could see it flashing in his eyes and his trembling became worse than ever.

"What you are telling me, Barty, is that you have caused six of my loyal Death Eaters to be injured and arrested. And that by so doing, several of our secrets are now known to the Aurors and the Ministry. You are telling me that in your eagerness to please me, you did not consider any of several possibilities that Bellatrix obviously did consider, and pointed out to you to show you the error of your thinking."

"I have failed you, my lord," Barty repeated, and went to his knees.

“Most disappointingly so, Barty.” His voice was almost caressing, like cold silk. The anger he had was building up, obviously so, but he sounded almost . . . kind. “And the consequences shall be tremendous. I am sorry that it has come to this, after the trust I placed in you.”

Severus couldn't avoid the room forever, and eventually all of the loyal Death Eaters were there to see Barty's pain and listen to him scream. None of them enjoyed it. Barty was placed so high, was such a loyal servant, but none of them could deny that the foolishness of his actions deserved punishment. And none of them could stop their master, in any case. They could only sit in stony silence until it was over.

In the end, Severus and Lucius were the ones who volunteered to bury Barty's body. No one else was willing to touch it.

Chapter Sixteen

Hermione was quietly studying her NEWT-level Transfiguration textbook, feeling frustrated in spite of herself. She wasn't going to be taking this exam. She couldn't shake her feelings about that, no matter how much she wanted to. Harry was more important to her, saving the world was more important to her. She'd made the choice. But she still clung tightly to the urge to study. Whether she had the certification or not, she would be well-educated. No ifs, ands, or buts.

She heard the knock on the front door, but her parents had taken the afternoon away from their practice to prepare a dinner for some friends. The knock was probably a delivery from the specialty grocer on the corner or something.

But her mother's voice sounded hesitant when she spoke to their visitor. Hermione would not have heard a word, but her mother's tone made her sit up and take notice.

"You're . . . you're Harry, then? Hermione's boyfriend?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Granger."

"Yes, it is certainly is. Hermione, love, your Harry is here!"

Hermione was instantly panicked. Why on earth was Harry here? After what had happened to Tonks and Simon, he should know better than to be out in public like this! She hurried out to meet him, knowing that Harry would have a damn good reason for being here and anxious to discover what it was. Had something happened to Sirius?

"Oh, there you are," he said in a relieved tone. He was still on the doorstep.

"Mother, at least let him come in," Hermione scolded.

Her mother looked worried. Hermione thought it was because she'd been told enough to realise Harry wouldn't be here if something weren't wrong. But then Hermione was stopped by Harry himself. He looked . . . nonchalant. Perfectly relaxed, in fact.

“Harry, what are you doing here?”

“I needed to see you,” he said, stepping in when Mum moved back. “I had a really hard night, and I thought it would help if I came here.”

This was delivered too casually. He was obviously trying to tell her something about a dream from Voldemort, but couldn’t because Mum was here. But that still didn’t make sense, he would have wanted her to come to Grimmauld Place to talk.

“Of course,” she frowned, motioning him to follow her. “Let’s go talk in the kitchen.”

He stepped closer to her, looking relieved. “Thanks.” He bent his head down to kiss her, and she smiled, despite herself. He loved to nuzzle his face in her hair. But wait . . . he was coming down to kiss her mouth? Harry wouldn’t just do that without warning, with no gentle hand on her shoulder or around her waist . . .

She ducked her head so his lips landed on her cheek, and forced herself to smile up at him as she led him to the kitchen. Her heart pounded so loudly she thought he must be able to hear it. She tried not to let him see her hands start to shake.

Her father was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables. Hermione felt like her vision was going narrow, and was made dizzy by the sight of those rhythmic flashes of knife— no! She was not going to faint, not now!

“Dad, this is Harry. Harry, my father.”

“Nice to meet you, sir.”

They shook hands, after Dad wiped his hands on a towel. Hermione tried not to throw up.

“May we have the kitchen for a bit?”

“Hermione, dear,” her father said sternly, eyeing his dinner preparations.

She clenched her jaw and looked at him. “Dad, you know what I just realised? We don’t have that tea that Harry likes. I know you and Mum had to pop down to the store for something, so would you mind going now so you can get the tea?”

Her dad gave her a long, searching look, and she looked back as fiercely as she knew how. Of course he didn’t know what tea, but the hard expression she gave him kept him from asking. She didn’t know if he’d see her desperation and fear, or just think she needed to talk to her boyfriend privately, but her father trusted her. With reluctance, he nodded.

“Of course, dear. We did need a few things, so we’ll go now.”

At her side, Harry looked upset, but when she beamed up at him, he smiled back.

“Sorry the tea will have to wait a few minutes, but the store is just there on the corner. You don’t mind?”

“Of course not,” he smiled.

“Let’s sit down, then,” she said. She heard her parents putting on their jackets in the hallway. Hurry, she begged them. She forced herself to brush her hand over Harry’s arm as they sat down in the breakfast nook, praying it would stall him just another moment. Her heart was thumping so hard now that it hurt. Her pulse was threatening to carry her away. Then the front door closed, and she drew a deep breath. She looked into the beautiful, clear green eyes she loved so well, and tried not to shudder in revulsion.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

He frowned, but it changed quickly to a snarl as he realised he was caught, and they both stand up, drawing their wands at exactly the same time.

“Avada Kedavra!” he shouted.

She flung herself onto the ground and felt the spell sizzle over her head. Oh Merlin, oh no. He wasn’t wasting time.

She was almost underneath the table. “Reducto!” she shouted, pointing her wand directly over her head, and rolled herself out of the way. The table exploded upward in a shower of splinters, and the disguised Death Eater shrieked as the bits of table caught his face, neck, and arms.

“Stupefy!” It. bounced off him and careened toward her. She rolled again, and clambered up to her feet, knowing she couldn’t fight from the ground for long.

It was so eerie, to watch Harry grin at her with wicked pleasure. This man was playing with her, certain that he could kill her at his leisure. She was only young, after all, and inexperienced. But he, much as he pretended to, didn’t know her.

“Relashio!”

He blocked it, and sent a curse that she barely dodged, light whizzing past her that shattered the kitchen window.

“Stupefy!”

He dodged it, and countered by slashing at her. She blocked it, but he cast the Sectumsempra furiously, biting into the walls and cutting the dishwasher in half. Water gushed out.

Hermione saw an opportunity. She caught the water pumping out, pushed it all in his direction while casting the most powerful warming charms possible, so that he was blasted by a jet of boiling steam. He screamed in pain, his skin turning viciously red and his hair dripping hot water down his back so that he writhed in pain. He waved his wand and swept the steam away, but the water kept pumping out of the bisected appliance. The floor was becoming flooded.

Then he hit her with a curse that stripped her throat instantly raw. She tried to speak, and only a hoarse croak issued forth. And it hurt. Her throat was on fire, and she could feel hot tears run down her cheeks. And he was smiling at her like he was enjoying it. It wasn't as if she were in any doubt now, but that more than anything convinced her she was not dueling her boyfriend. He would never have that look on his face, not when seeing a person in pain.

"Now, my pretty thing, since you are unable—," he began, then his eyes opened in shock, and with a howl he tried to grab at his wand with his left hand as it flew from his right, but he missed.

She caught it, and returned that wicked grin. She didn't need her voice, and he was a fool to think so. A jet of red light flew from her wand and knocked him straight into the wall. He looked up at her with confusion, groaning. She stood over him, panting for breath.

"They're coming," he muttered. "When I don't return, they'll come."

Hermione felt another leap of fear. This wasn't over. She had to finish this and get out. She silently Petrified him. Making sure he saw it, she snapped his wand over her knee and tossed the pieces through the jaggedly broken kitchen window. Then she ran.

She didn't pause to take in the destruction of her home. She didn't see the slashed wallpaper, curling down the wall, or the shattered dishes that had fallen when the bottom of the cupboard had been sliced off. Didn't take in the chunks of table that littered the flooded floor. She just ran.

Her parents were already inside the grocer's, but she didn't care about making a scene. She ran straight to them.

". . . think they're having an argument?" she heard her mother say. "Maybe we shouldn't have left them alone to— Hermione!" she cried out.

Hermione threw herself at her parents, and began to frantically drag them toward the door.

“Dearest, what’s happened?” her father said, reaching out his hand and touching it to her face. His fingers came away red with blood. She hadn’t known she’d been hit, and wildly wondered if it was from the table or from his curses. Her clothes were dripping with water, sweat, and blood, and her hair was full of splintered wood. Her parents were just staring at her. Along with every other patron in the store.

She just yanked on them again, trying to get them to follow her. They had to go now.

“Did Harry do this to you?”

She struggled to speak, and felt herself crying again from the torture of it. “Not . . . Harry . . .” she rasped. “Disguise. Hurry. Run.”

Completely bemused, they followed her out of the store. She led them around the corner to the back of the store, where it jutted up against a complex of houses. She just hoped no one was looking. One parent in each arm, she Apparated directly to the front stoop of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place.

She could barely make her trembling hand into a fist to knock on the door, but she did it. Her parents were clutching each other and fighting dizziness, looking green. The door opened, and there was Harry, her Harry, the real Harry.

“Hermione,” he said in shock, taking in her appearance. Not grinning at her pain. Looking scared. She fell into his arms and began to sob. He held her in one arm and used the other to yank her parents inside. He slammed the door shut behind them, then turned his full attention to her, holding her close. “Shh, you’re all right now. Hermione, shh. Don’t cry. It’s over. It’s all over.” He looked at her parents. “What happened?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Mum said in a faint voice.

Dad was just as shaken, but it came out angry. "You, boy, are what happened. You came to our house, and she sent us to the store, and then . . ."

Harry shook his head in denial. "I haven't gone anywhere. Hermione?"

"Polyjuice," she whispered past the pain in her throat. "Looked like you. Got ingredient . . . from school, maybe."

"Who?"

"Don't know. Fought him off. Said more were coming. Ran."

"You're hurt," he said softly, seeing the blood smeared on his shirt. "Come with me. Sirius! Sirius!"

Sirius appeared in the hallway, looking like he'd come from the study. "What is it?"

"Take these two into the kitchen. Maybe give them something for shock? I have to take care of Hermione."

"Hermione, what happened?" Sirius asked in alarm.

She just shook her head, leaning against the steady rock of her boyfriend.

"I don't know everything yet, but it seems like a Death Eater managed to disguise himself as me and got into their house. Hermione fought with him."

"Is he dead?" Sirius asked immediately.

She shook her head mutely.

"I'll go."

"No," she croaked. "Reinforcements. Too late."

Sirius scowled, then gave her a terse nod, and turned to her parents. "You're Mr. and Mrs. Granger? I'm Sirius Black, Harry's godfather and one of Hermione's professors. Why don't you come with me into the kitchen? I'll get you some tea or some coffee . . ."

Hermione gave the staircase a dull look when Harry led her over to it. It looked impossibly tall. So she didn't protest when he scooped her up and carried her, stomping on the stairs and shouting, "Draco!" like it was some kind of emergency. It was just a little cut, after all . . . Well, now her head was throbbing, so maybe she'd bumped it or been hit by the table. And her throat did hurt pretty awfully. And she thought she might have broken one of her fingers when she'd rolled on the floor. Maybe it was a little bit urgent.

Harry idly played his fingers through Hermione's hair as he looked over the documents Sirius had procured. He hadn't let her out of his sight since she had arrived with her parents three days ago. Her parents had been utterly shocked by the whole thing, and were understandably angry about not being allowed to go home. But Harry certainly wasn't going to argue about having his girlfriend right here, where she was safe, and she didn't seem to be issuing too many complaints herself. Even if he was ever so proud of her, he didn't think she needed to do it twice.

Sirius had taken a few members of the Order down to clear up the water and fix the broken window and table so that no one would know anything was wrong. Moody had arranged for someone to watch the house that first day, but they all agreed it was pointless. She'd gotten away, and she wasn't going to be dumb enough to come back. Surely the Death Eaters knew that and wouldn't be returning, either.

"They look perfect," Harry said with satisfaction, returning the documents to their envelope and setting it on the arm of the sofa. "Did you get the plane tickets?"

Hermione nodded, and leaned into him with a sigh. She knew what needed to be done, but she didn't really want to talk about it. Of course, she'd been horrified when Harry had pointed out all the things she was leaving out of her plan— birth records and identification cards, bank accounts, motor vehicle registration. The plan was to

make her parents think they were someone else, a couple with no children who were dead set on opening up a new practice in Australia. Hermione hadn't really thought about all the things that went into being a legitimate person with the ability to open a business. He had no doubt she would be able to perform the magic required, but she'd be leaving her parents in quite a fix without all this.

Luckily for them, the person Sirius had gotten the identification for Harry Black remembered Sirius, and was willing to work with him again. He'd rushed the delivery, as well, for a small (okay, huge) fee.

"I don't want to do this," Hermione whispered. She was cuddled against his chest, almost lying down, staring at the wall.

His arms, so carefully wrapped around her, tightened just a bit. "I know."

"They don't want me to do it."

"They don't? I thought they said they understood."

"They do, and they're okay with going, but . . . they want me to come with them. They say they won't do it unless I come along."

Harry was silent, trying to think of what to say. On the one hand, he thought it would rip his heart right out of his chest to lose her. But if she was so far away, so hidden . . .

"You could, you know," he said softly. "Go with them. If you decide to do that, I won't argue. Having you safe would be very comforting to me, to say the least."

Hermione didn't even bother to turn around. "We've been over this."

He kissed the top of her head. "We have. Can't blame me for trying, though."

She sighed, and rested her hand on top of his. "I love you."

No more needed to be said.

Harry was going to stay with her throughout the process. They were going to do it in front of the Granger's dentistry practice, with a cab already on the way to take them to the airport. Harry and Hermione would stay under the Invisibility Cloak so they wouldn't have to explain their presence, and they'd Apparate as soon as the cab had gone.

But first, they just rested there, while Hermione prepared herself to reach into her mother's brain and make her forget she had a daughter.

"They knew we would respond, so they were wearing masks to make identification impossible," Kingsley continued, his voice dulled by the horror of his report.

Amelia had long since dropped her head into her hands, but she was listening. As best she could while dealing with her fury and thinking, Not this, not again. It's just like last time. No, it's worse than last time.

"When we arrived, they had already killed two of the Muggles they were attacking. The Aurors prevented any further Muggle death, but Dawlish was killed in the fight." Kingsley must be as exhausted as she was, to say that without even flinching. He'd worked with Dawlish. But he just continued on, in a heartbreakingly hollow voice. "The Muggle bodies had sustained injuries that could be explained as an automobile accident, so we staged one of those for the police to discover. The Muggles who were still alive were Obliviated and sent on their way. We did capture one of the attackers, though. He was taken alive."

Amelia picked her head up. "We have a Death Eater?"

"Yes, Minister."

"What has he said?"

"Nothing, yet. He refuses to talk."

"Well, dose him with Veritaserum!" she snapped. "This is no time for niceties, Kingsley! We need to know if there are other attacks on

Muggle shopping centers planned, among other things. Here,” she riffled through a stack of forms in her desk drawer, withdrawing the one that granted rights to use the potion during interrogation. She scrawled her signature across the bottom and thrust it toward him. “Here.”

She felt a little pang about using it. Only the Wizengamot should be able to decide on the use of Veritaserum, but she had been forced to call a state of emergency two weeks ago, when Hogwarts had begun its autumn term. Severus Snape, the slimy bastard of a new Headmaster, had declared that only pureblooded children could attend the school this year. And Death Eaters had begun targeting the homes of those who were barred from school. The entire Ministry was working around the clock to keep those children safe. They stopped the attacks when they could, set up impromptu classes on defense for those who wanted to learn, helped others go into hiding. Some were fleeing the country, entirely, and just how that was going to make magical Britain look to the rest of the world . . .

Kingsley was just looking at the parchment, sort of befuddled. She knew he was tired, and upset about the loss of Dawlish, but they really had no time for this.

“Kingsley! Take this and carry it out at once!”

He could see the piece of parchment waving in front of him, and he knew she wanted him to take it. His arm came up slowly, like it was moving through some thick liquid. Had to act normal, had to arouse no suspicion . . . But it was time. The time had come to fulfill his purpose in coming to work this morning. Minister Bones was making things awfully difficult for them, and he had to fix that.

He stood up and drew his wand. One simple spell, and this enormous problem would be taken care of. She wouldn’t trouble them anymore.

“Kingsley?” she was saying in a very different voice. Not so impatient now, was she? Not at the point of his wand.

“I’m sorry, Minister,” he murmured. Then he blinked. He was sorry, wasn’t he? He shouldn’t be sorry. He wanted to do this. He was

supposed to kill her. But why? Why would he want to kill his boss? That didn't make any sense, did it?

"Kingsley, snap out of it!"

No, this was necessary, of course. She was an old woman who snapped at everyone and expected to get her way, and it was causing people to die and be put into prison. Yes, she had to die. Of course. But that still didn't seem right.

"Avada Kedavra," he mumbled, and a pathetic green fizzle hit her desk and caused a curl of smoke to rise from it.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt, you fight this off, do you hear me?" she was shouting, and she had her own wand out now.

Fight what off? He wasn't sure. Fight her?

"Minister?" he tried to ask.

"Kingsley, listen to me. You have been placed under the Imperius Curse, do you understand? You don't want to kill me. Someone else had ordered you to do that, and I know you are much stronger than them. Fight off that curse, Shacklebolt!"

Oh. That made so much sense now. Yes.

With a tremendous effort, he thrust off the feeling of moving through liquid, thrust away those confusing feelings of wanting to kill her. He didn't like killing people. Of course not. He was a good person! He was an Auror! Well, now he was Undersecretary to the Minister. And he certainly wasn't going to kill her, what a foolish notion.

Abruptly, his legs gave out. Luckily there was a chair next to him, and he managed to drop into it. His wand clattered to the floor.

He stared at her in shock. "I'm so sorry," he whispered, feeling himself go cold. "By mighty Merlin, I never thought . . . never thought they could get to me. Are you all right?"

“All right? I’m fine! You’re far too strong for that silly curse to work, you couldn’t even manage to ruin my desk!” she said briskly. But she was pale and there was sweat on her forehead.

He carefully squeezed his hands together. He was sort of numb. They sat in silence, because she was patiently waiting while he struggled to find something to say. “Minister, I think it might be best if I resign right now. This was far too close a call . . .”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she sniffed. “You are far too useful to resign. I need you.”

“Minister, I almost killed you . . .”

“Come now, Kingsley, I thought I told you to call me Amelia,” she chided. “You can’t possibly think that would work twice? They won’t attempt to put you under that curse again.”

“No, but it does mean someone here at the Ministry is a Death Eater,” Kingsley pointed out. “And they could use me to get to you in some other way.”

“We already knew we had that problem,” she argued. “Those Death Eaters know far too much about what goes on in my Ministry. However, using you to get to me would be much less problem if I stopped coming in to the office. I shall simply work from home.”

“Minister, that is not a good idea,” he said carefully. “The public needs to see you presenting a strong front.”

“The public needs to see me not getting murdered in my office.”

He flinched, feeling cold all over again.

“Oh, do perk up, Kingsley. There is a Death Eater in a holding cell, and you have a parchment granting permission to interrogate him. I should think we’d find out a way to plug up this leak in the Ministry if you’d hurry along to use that permission.”

She was a very formidable witch, indeed. Kingsley felt himself beginning to smile. "Right away, Minister."

"And then you will take the rest of the day off," she ordered. "And you will spend it strengthening your mental defenses. If you resign, your replacement is likely to be much more vulnerable than you, did you think of that? You had better recover from this and be back on form tomorrow."

"Yes, Minister."

"If you ever try to kill me again, Kingsley, I shall have to fire you."

Now he did smile. "Yes, Minister."

"I told you, it's Amelia!"

Sirius had the Daily Prophet hovering at eye level in front of his breakfast when Harry and Hermione came downstairs to find something to eat.

"Please tell me you didn't go out to purchase that," Harry said.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "What do you take me for?" he demanded through a mouthful of hot cereal.

Harry and Hermione shared a look, and they held back their laughter.

"I asked Draco to start bringing it over when everyone is finished with it at the Tonks'. I get all the news from the Order, but I want to know what the press is saying."

"Nothing relevant, I'd wager."

"You'd be losing money," Sirius cautioned.

"Really?"

The two young people sat down at the table and started browsing through the pages that Sirius had finished reading.

"They're actually taking things seriously, aren't they?" Harry said in wonder.

"As long as you're reading between the lines," Hermione agreed.

"They're afraid to come out and say what they mean, when it could get them killed. They have to be cautious."

"Then what's the point of saying anything?" Hermione sniffed.

"Look at this, Miss Garnet has an article on the second page! And it isn't even about me!"

Hermione made a face at him.

"I can't help being front-page news," Harry smirked. "It's not my fault." Then he glanced back down and frowned deeply. "Do you see this?"

"Minister Bones . . ." Hermione started reading. "She hasn't shown up in her office. Did she step down? Has she been taken? How is it that not a single person seems to know why?"

"Wouldn't say not a single person," Sirius observed, his own eyes still on page six hovering in front of him. He spooned in another mouthful of his cereal.

"Nobody said anything about it at the Order meeting last night," Harry protested. "How do you know?"

"You noticed how agitated Kingsley was, didn't you?"

"Yes. I thought it was because his job was rather stressful of late."

"I won't argue with you there."

"Sirius! Just tell us and quit acting so superior just because you already know."

"I'm not," Sirius said, looking away from the paper and turning troubled eyes on Harry. "I'm just not sure whether or not to say anything."

"Who are we going to tell?" Harry snorted. "Draco?"

Hermione ducked her head to hide her scowl. She didn't find that a very amusing joke.

Sirius sighed. "Someone got to Kingsley. They had their suspicions that there was a Death Eater in the Minister's office, but now they're certain, because someone got close enough to Kingsley to put him under the Imperius."

Hermione gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.

"They tried to force him to kill Minister Bones."

Harry nearly tore the paper when his hands clenched shut. "Is she dead?"

"No," Sirius assured him. "She saw what was happening, and he was too strong for it, and she got him to fight it off. But it shook both of them up, to say the least. So she's going to do everything she can from her house, which she's hidden. Kingsley has a way to contact her, but he's the only one in the Ministry who does."

"Why did he tell you, if he wasn't going to tell the rest of the Order?" Harry asked shrewdly.

Sirius shrugged. "They thought someone should be able to find her, just in case. The Death Eaters probably can't use Kingsley again, so they might decide to just get rid of him and try to deal with his replacement. The Minister, and Kingsley, wanted someone else from our side to be able to warn her if that happens."

"And they picked you because they're absolutely sure of you," Harry guessed.

"Sometimes it pays to be such a good guy," Sirius said with a grin.

Hermione giggled.

“Why is that funny?” Harry asked. “You know you can’t encourage his pathetic attempts at humour.”

“It’s funny because he was a convict for nearly fifteen years, and now he’s the only person the Minister trusts apart from her own Undersecretary.”

Sirius had to chuckle at that as he got up to rinse out his bowl. Harry just smiled and kissed her cheek.

“What do you want for breakfast?” he asked her.

“Eggs,” she said decisively. “And toast. I’ll help.”

“You’ll sit there and relax,” Harry countered. “Tea?”

“I can make tea,” she insisted.

“I know you can, but I want to make it for you. Read the paper with Sirius.”

She sighed in exasperation and reached for page three. She’d been a little bit sad about sending her parents away, she couldn’t deny that. She’d felt rather miserable and wretched that day, in fact. But she was not so delicate that she needed to be waited on to keep her from falling apart. She said as much in a little huff under her breath while Harry clattered around with the frying pan. Sirius heard her.

“He feels like he needs to do something, to prove how much you mean to him,” Sirius said softly.

“What? Why? I know that he loves me.”

“Think about it. You are giving up your whole life, everything you value, for him. Your parents, your education, your home . . . you set that all aside to be with him right now. You can see that he’s feeling like he’s not giving you enough in return, can’t you?”

"I don't want anything in return," she countered. "He gives me himself. That's enough."

Sirius looked sad. For how long? he was thinking. How long is that enough before you need some safety and some freedom, as well? No one can go on like this for long. He didn't say it aloud, which was fortunate. Hermione would likely have slapped him for it.

Hermione set the paper aside after only one more page, and looked over at Harry. "Things are getting very ugly out there," she said.

"I noticed. Attacks on Muggleborns have skyrocketed. The Ministry can't keep up."

"So we'll start looking for the two missing Horcruxes today?"

Harry was buttering their toast, and his hands paused. A dab of butter slid off the knife onto the counter. "I thought you might need some time to recuperate."

"My parents left two days ago, Harry. We need to get to work."

"I know."

"My well-being can wait. This war can't."

"I know," Harry muttered, and the knife scraped over the bread again. "I just didn't want . . ."

Hermione rose from her chair, walked over to him, and kissed him carefully. "I know, Harry. I love you, too."

"I think we need to leave," Harry said. They were in his room, with Hermione sitting cross-legged on his bed and him in a chair beside it. Their notes about Horcruxes were spread out around Hermione, confirming for them what was left to do: locate and destroy the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw artifacts. Kill Nagini the snake. And then they could take on Voldemort.

“Leave?”

“You and I are at the top of Voldemort’s priority list, now. I think we need to go. He’d rather pursue us than pursue anyone else in this house. I know it won’t make a huge difference, but if it keeps them even nominally more safe . . .”

“He’ll focus all his efforts on getting into this house, so long as you and I are in it,” Hermione said slowly. “But he’ll redirect it to locating us if we leave. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’re right,” Hermione said. “With the number of people who know this house, and the number of people Voldemort will set to finding it, it’s only a matter of time. We have to leave for our own protection, as much as theirs.”

“Got it in one,” Harry said with a sad smile.

“Where will we go?” Hermione asked calmly.

Harry climbed onto the bed to hold her. “God, I love you,” he muttered. “I can’t believe how strong you are.”

“I think I’m going to fall apart when this is all over,” she said. “But I can’t afford to now. So, where will we go?”

“I think our best bet is to just go off the map entirely. Take a tent out into the woods and not use magic at all except to set up defensive wards around our campsite.”

“I hate camping,” Hermione sighed. “Okay. We’d better start packing. What should we take?”

“Some things to cook with. Bedding. Clothes. Some non-perishable food. A hatchet for firewood, a fishing rod and tackle. Um . . .”

“Book on edible plants,” Hermione stepped in smoothly. She was scribbling their list down on a sheet of parchment. “No magic, you say?”

“Can’t be spotted if we’re not using it,” Harry said grimly.

“Okay. Waterproof matches, then, and kerosene lantern with a few extra canisters of fuel. Bug repellent. We can sort out clothes and things as we go. Let’s make a list of books we’ll need.”

Harry settled down next to her with his arm around her waist, watching the list grow as they discussed what they needed. Hermione said they didn’t need to worry about size. She knew a spell that would make a single bag hold everything. Harry didn’t doubt her. In fact, he resolved to watch her perform it so he’d have that very handy knowledge for his own use. He tried to keep the list small, anyway. He felt they’d be moving around a lot, and he didn’t want any unnecessary clutter.

When the list was nearly complete and they were ready to start packing up, Hermione looked up at Harry with a frown.

“How is Voldemort going to find out we’re not here anymore?” she asked. “This will all be sort of pointless if he comes here looking for us, anyway.”

Harry nodded. “I think we’ll be able to tell him.”

She frowned, and tried to get him to explain, but he wouldn’t say anything more. They got started packing right away, but even with all their efficiency, it still took them most of two days to gather everything together. Hermione was correct; size was no problem. They shoved some very cozy bedrolls and thermal sleeping bags into her bookbag, along with food, supplies, and gear. It might be a little awkward to retrieve, but it was light as feather.

“My good luck for dating a genius,” Harry said, and kissed her forehead.

“I was thinking the same thing,” she grinned.

They tried to say goodbye to Draco, but he was acting especially sarcastic and bitter, so they mostly just waved from the doorway. Harry shook hands with Simon and made him promise to study hard. To his surprise, Simon thumped him on the back and stepped away with a suspicious sheen to his eyes. They decided not to risk going to the werewolf compound, and made Simon promise to say goodbye to Remus and Dora (who couldn't really go by Tonks, now that she was married) for them.

Sirius saw them to the door. He'd been almost silent the whole time they were packing, to the point that Hermione had thought he was angry with them. She'd especially thought he was angry last night, when he and Harry disappeared into their practice room for almost two hours and then went straight up to the Potions lab to treat their injuries. But when Harry shouldered their bag and turned to give him a final farewell, Sirius' silence broke.

He grabbed Harry into the tightest hug she'd ever seen, so hard that it made her hurt just to see it.

"Goodbye, kiddo," he said hoarsely. "Your mum and dad would be so proud of you. I know I am. I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you, too," Harry replied, sounding just as scratchy. "It's been almost ten years, did you realise that?"

"I've never let you out of my sight since then."

"I never wanted you to. But I have to go now. You've given up so much to keep me safe. It's my turn."

"I'd argue with that, but you're twice as stubborn as your mother ever was and I know you wouldn't listen."

"I love you, Sirius."

"I love you, too."

Harry finally, reluctantly, stepped out of his embrace. "We have to go."

Sirius reached out much more slowly to pull Hermione into a hug. He didn't try to squeeze her to death, thankfully. She was already crying, she didn't need it to be any worse. "Take care of him. You're a good woman, Hermione."

"Thank you," she sniffed. "I will."

"Goodbye," Harry said softly, and they turned for the door. Just when his hand fell on it, Sirius gripped his shoulder.

"Harry. Come back, okay? Just come back."

Harry didn't turn around. "I will."

They stepped through the door and shut it behind them, and Harry slumped against it for a moment, gathering himself together.

"Ready?" he whispered.

She nodded. She tried not to let herself show how nervous she was. She'd been so shocked and dismayed when Harry said the Death Eaters were watching this street, and had been doing so for days. They'd been spotted, somehow, when they were sending her parents off. The Death Eaters hadn't found a way to get to the house, yet. But they knew it was on Grimmauld Place.

They stepped off the porch.

"No, Sirius took the cat, remember?" Harry said. "We're the last ones out."

Hermione sighed deeply. "I'm going to miss that house."

"We all will, but it's better if we abandon it. Ready?"

They clasped hands and Disapparated, trusting that someone had heard their conversation. They appeared first in Hogsmeade, and

immediately Disapparated again to appear at her house. They jumped in quick succession to all of the places most familiar to them, five times in a row. Then, finally, they directed themselves to the place they'd picked out. In the forest, miles away from any road, with a river running by.

They held their breath when they arrived, and kept their hands locked together. Tense and straining to hear any noise, they waited. Nothing. Little by little, they began to relax. It was nearly five minutes of standing still as stone before they agreed (whispering and feeling a bit silly for doing so) that they hadn't been followed.

They set to work. They spelled the whole area with every defensive ward they had been able to look up in two days' time, which turned out to be a lot. Even working together, they were at it for several solid minutes. Then they cleared off a nice flat space of ground and rid it of rocks and got to work setting up the tent. It was a wizarding tent, with plenty of space inside despite looking like a pup tent on the outside.

They crawled inside. There was room enough to stand up once they were through the tiny entrance. Hermione grabbed on to Harry and breathed deeply.

"I just can't relax," she confessed. "I know it worked, and we're well-hidden, but . . ."

"I know," he said, rubbing his hand in a circle over her back. "I'm still on edge, myself. But we're going to be all right. Now let's get our beds set up and our gear out, before it starts to get dark. We can go pieces in a little bit, but we've got some work to do first."

"Okay," she said, grateful to have the distraction.

They decided not to get out anything they didn't immediately need. They didn't want to have to pack it all up again, if they had to leave in a hurry. Harry said he wasn't hungry, and Hermione's stomach was too tight to eat, so they left all the cooking gear in the bag. The tent ended up looking rather sparse, that night, with just a little pile of clothes, their lamp, and their bedrolls.

Hermione began to climb into her bed, but gave the whole arrangement a doubtful look. She wouldn't be able to sleep like this. It was too dark, too quiet . . . too lonely.

"You know, it would be far more comfortable if we stacked these pads on top of one another, and zipped the two sleeping bags together," she suggested.

Harry gave her a soft smile. "I suppose it would be."

So they arranged it that way, and she crawled in when Harry gestured for her to go ahead. They had napped together three or four times, now, but this would be the first time they deliberately lay down to sleep for the night in the same bed. She knew she was blushing terribly when Harry slid in beside her, but he didn't say anything to tease her. He just gave her hand a little squeeze, lay down on his side, and left her with some space to breathe and get her bearings.

It was wonderfully cosy, both of them tucked down inside the giant sleeping bag they'd created. Hermone turned on her side so that she was facing the same direction as Harry, and hesitantly slid one arm over him so that she could comfortably snuggle up against his back. He lay very still for a moment, then put his hand over hers.

"Goodnight, Hermione," he said.

"Goodnight."

Ten minutes later found her tense and unable to sleep.

"Hermione? Are you still feeling afraid?" Harry asked sleepily.

"Yes."

"I'm going to turn around, okay?"

She moved her arm, and he slowly turned over so that he was facing her.

“We’re safe here. We did very well today. You don’t have anything to be afraid of, just now. Let’s get some sleep.”

He put his arm over her, let her head settle just under his chin, and began rubbing his hand over her back like he had earlier. She released a deep sigh, and finally felt the tension begin to leave her.

“I’m going to protect you,” he murmured, and then they both drifted away.

Chapter Seventeen

By morning, they hadn't been attacked, so they assumed they would be safe staying in one place for a few days. Harry went fishing, and they set up a camp stove to cook. Harry had thought ahead about what might be available when foraging for food, and had reckoned on fish. They therefore had their choice of frying it in cornmeal or steaming it under a Bubble Charm with an option of herbs. They chose herbs, since it was simpler, and opened a can of mixed vegetables to go along with it.

Sitting on a fallen tree, with another large hunk of wood as their table, they talked.

"Malfoy had at least one. I think it's possible he could have had more than one."

"That's true, but wouldn't Riddle have rather spread them out more, to lessen the chances of their being discovered or damaged?"

They agreed on that, and set to figuring out who else might have been given guardianship of a Horcrux. They had decided to call Lord Voldemort by his given name, Tom Riddle. It was part of Harry's campaign to make him more human and less of a giant they couldn't overcome. After all, he would say, this entire business was about making him as human as possible so he could effectively be brought to justice.

"Who's his closest servant, though?" Harry said when Hermione began bringing up too many names. "I know he trusts Snape implicitly at this point, but he probably wouldn't have back then. He was too young."

"Who are you thinking?"

"I'm going back to the beginning. I think the Lestranges. Bellatrix has always been his most devoted servant, and she's a really skilled witch, as well. He would have trusted her with a Horcrux, if he was going to give it to anyone."

“You’re right. Do you think it would be in their house?”

Harry shook his head. “What the Order has gathered is that they don’t have a house anymore. The only property they have left after their stint in Azkaban is their Gringotts vault.”

“Where do they live, then?” Hermione asked, her curiosity piqued.

“I think at the Malfoys. It’s Death Eaters headquarters. I think Riddle stays there, as well.”

Hermione shuddered. “Can you imagine sharing a house with him?”

Harry poked at his food, sickened by the thought of Voldemort living in a spare bedroom in Grimmauld Place. “No. But I bet that’s part of the reason Draco finally shut up and grew up.”

“Eat,” Hermione chided him. “You’re going to need it.”

Harry obediently ate, despite being not at all hungry. “It’s in their Gringotts vault.”

“You think so?”

“Seems likely.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“I have the beginnings of one. I don’t even know how . . . this is going to be a lot of work. There are so many people, every step of the way, and I want to protect who I can. We’re going to need help.”

“Harry, what on earth are you thinking of?”

“Deception,” he answered simply. “Layers and layers of it. With any luck, they won’t even know it’s gone until the war’s over.” He began shoveling food into his mouth without a lot of chewing. A dangerous proposition, since neither of them was particularly good at cleaning a fish and he was swallowing a lot of bones.

"I said eat, not choke," she scolded. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I brought a lot of ingredients, so we can brew what we need, but it's going to take forever to prepare."

"Why don't we just go back to the house to see if Draco has any?"

Harry frowned. "I don't want to go back there unless we have no other choice. Besides, we didn't have any when you and I left, so it'll take him just as long to prepare as it would me."

"Do you mind telling me what we're preparing?"

"Polyjuice Potion. And then . . . Well, we can use a mundane disguise at first. We just need to get in and out of the owl post office without being recognised, just long enough to send a letter to Ron."

"Ron Weasley? Harry, you'd better start explaining yourself."

At her stern look, Harry marshaled his thoughts into order and told her the plan. They first, preliminary stage of their plan, they were able to carry out while they waited for their Polyjuice to brew.

-O-O-O-

Dear Neville,

I am hoping, first of all, that you are well and that your duties are not causing you to rupture anything important. Head Boy, I shudder to think. Believe me, mate, you're the one doing all the hard work, and I don't envy you the responsibility you've accepted.

That said, I know why you're doing it, and I would never suggest you don't have the devotion necessary. I know better, just as I know better than to waste your time just to ask you how you're doing. Actually, the reason I'm writing is simply to ask you to deliver the attached letter to Ron Weasley. I have a request to make of him, and I thought it would be by far better for him not to attract attention by receiving unexplained post from strange owls. Believe me, this is as far as I mean for you to go: just deliver the letter to Ron, and don't

ask questions. With any luck, neither of you will actually be put into any danger.

Thank you, Neville. Keep your chin up.

Harry

Neville found himself blinking back tears as he read the letter from Harry. Mostly, the tears were due to the sting of the salve Seamus was rubbing into his wounds. Those damn Carrow siblings were a terror, make no mistake. But Neville was satisfied with bearing the brunt of their cruelty. These marks on his body meant that a third-year Slytherin girl had gone back to her dormitory unharmed, after asking the wrong question. Her safety at his expense had gotten him into a shouting match with Veronica, about how she could protect her own house. He'd said it didn't matter, she said it did, he said he was going to protect any student who needed it, and she yelled back that he was wearing enough scars from trying to save his own bloody housemates. He'd been touched when he'd figured out that she was yelling at him because she was upset that he was hurt.

They were the only thing standing between the little kids and the atrocities of this new administration. They were taking that seriously. It was nice to know that Harry was taking it seriously, too.

"Who's that from?" Seamus asked in curiosity, kneading the salve into Neville's shoulder and making him gasp.

"No one," he answered softly.

Seamus had learned not to argue when Neville said something like that. They sat in silence in the near-empty Room of Requirement—the only safe place to treat something received as punishment. The students collectively refused to allow Madam Pomfrey to get herself into trouble. She wanted to treat them against strict instructions to let them suffer; those in the know would find their way here and those that weren't DL would make do in their dormitory with their frightened and clumsy roommates.

When Neville was feeling better, he went back to his own dorm room, to find that Ron had let Ginny in there again to do her studying. They'd gotten used to seeing her there, her books spread over Harry's empty bed, since the two Weasley siblings had ceased to let the other out of their sight unless they were in class. No one objected. They understood. If Neville had siblings, he'd want them nearby, as well.

However, he wasn't sure if Harry wanted Ginny to see this letter. So he waited until Ginny slipped out to use the lavatory to give Ron the parchment folded up inside his own letter. He hadn't read it. He knew he wasn't supposed to.

-O-O-O-

Dear Ron,

Sorry to spring a surprise on you, but I need your help. I have a plan in the works, something that will go a long way toward defeating this nasty character I keep hearing about. I know that your involvement is a risk, and I'm trying to protect everyone I need help from, as much as I can. So, really, what I'm saying is that you shouldn't ask questions about the plan. If you can help me with this one thing, you will have done your part.

I had considered leaving you out of things, but I need to get into your family's house. I thought you might have an easier time sneaking inside than I would. I cannot tell you what I am going to do with it, but I need to procure your father's hair. I'd ask him personally, but it's like I said: I want to protect everyone who has any part in my plan. I'd rather he not even know. Likewise, I want you to sneak into the house and get this without telling him so that he doesn't know of your involvement.

You have some time to figure out a way to sneak out of the school and procure the hair, while I work on another step in my plan. Then I will contact you again. It will not be through Neville, next time. I really hope that you will be willing to do this. But I will understand if you are not. This is a huge risk that I am asking you to take, and it is also a risk to your father. I wouldn't ask if I didn't already know how

committed the Weasleys are to this fight. But as I said, I will understand if you can't do this. If you choose not to, simply ignore the next letter, and I will find a way to do it without you.

I don't mean to insult you or anything. I just mean to tell you that I am sorry for asking so much of your family. I'm afraid we won't be able to communicate properly, so just wait for my next letter. It may be a couple of weeks before I send it, and when I do, it will be spelled to be read only upon being touched with a wand and having a password spoken. The password is, for my own sentimental reasons, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." Just hang on to the hair, once you get it.

I hope you're surviving school, Ron, and I hope Ginny is okay. I wish I was there to help.

Harry

Ron was indignant at the idea that he might choose not to do his part. Not help! Like some weakling or coward! A small, rational voice at the back of his mind told him that Harry's interest in his father's hair was not for any lark. There were few reasons a person would want such a thing, and Harry's plan was likely to put Dad, and therefore the rest of the family, in danger.

Ron looked at Ginny, sitting Indian-style on Harry's old bed, trying to do her "Muggle Studies" homework without throwing up. Despite how fiercely he was trying to protect her now, they'd all chosen this. They'd all chosen this danger, because they knew it was right. Ron wouldn't change his mind, and so this must be done. Whatever it was. Ron wanted to know more. He didn't care what Harry said about protecting people, Ron wasn't asking for protection.

He went to find Neville, and they went to the Room of Requirement. It was hours of applied concentration to the task before they finally managed to create a safe passage from the castle. And boy, but Aberforth Dumbledore was surprised to see the two of them stumble into his pub.

-o-o-o-

Dear Ernie,

I must apologise up front for sending you this letter, because I know it is likely to cause you some worry. But I would ask you to keep your worries to yourself. I am in the middle of executing a plan that will strike a major blow to You-Know-Who, but I need the silence of everyone whom I must ask to be involved. I know I can trust you, because Neville and Ron trust you.

Your part is very simple. All you need do is deliver the attached letter to Ron Weasley. I simply didn't want to have attention drawn to him by his receiving letters from unknown owls, since I need him for something else. Thanks for your assistance, Ernie. Keep fighting, as I know you have been. You are doing everything I wish I could be. The end is in sight.

Harry Potter

-O-O-O-

Dear Ron,

I know it's been almost three weeks, and I hope you're not panicking about the length of time. I had a few things I needed to prepare before I was ready to execute the next stage of the plan. Now I'm ready. If you haven't been able to get your father's hair, ignore this letter. If you received it from any hands but those of Ernie Macmillan, ignore it. I know I spelled it to open only the password, but my paranoia is reaching new heights. If it wasn't Ernie, throw it away and throw that hair away.

If you are ready, then we need to meet. I will have one other task for you, if you are willing. Please be at the edge of your home's ward boundaries, on the side nearest Ottery St. Catchpole, at eight o'clock this Tuesday evening. I am hoping that you will be able to have someone cover up your absence for an hour or two (assuming someone is keeping close tabs on you like that). As much as your first task might have seemed disagreeable, I imagine you'll like the

second task I have for you even less. I'm just going to need your trust, until this is over.

I won't wait at the meeting place for long, on the chance that you didn't receive the letter or that someone intercepted it en route, somehow. (A very unlikely possibility, but I might have mentioned that I'm getting paranoid.) Make sure you're there at eight o'clock.

Thanks for doing this, Ron. Once it's safe to talk about, I'll make sure you get some serious accolades for this. For now, you'll have to live with my unending gratitude. I hope to see you soon.

Harry

-o-o-o-

They had tried to bake bread on top of their fire. It had risen all right, hardly even flat, but the bottom was burnt black. Hermione was slicing the bottom off the loaf and simultaneously studying the seventh level in the Standard Book of Spells series. She was not slicing into her hand—not yet.

“Hey,” Harry said softly, and placed his hands over hers. “Let me do that. I want you to look over this letter to Ron before we eat.”

She turned her head, face in a puzzled frown with having her concentration broken. “You're funny, you know. You're perfectly capable of composing a letter.”

“I know I am. I just like you to know everything.”

That got a smile from her. She handed over the knife and took up the letter. Harry glanced at the page she had her book open to, and got quite distracted by the text. He didn't cut himself, although he did jump when the spell they'd set on the pot of soup started chiming to indicate it was hot enough.

Hermione looked up from Harry's second letter to Ron, and said, “Okay, you can send this.” She couldn't help but feel a slight pout forming. “Why don't you ever mention me?” she asked quietly. “That

is . . . I'm not looking for praise. But I am a little bit hurt. I know you're not ashamed of me or anything, but you didn't say anything about me to them."

Harry was immediately at her side, his arm around her waist and his lips in her hair. The soup could boil over, for all he cared. "Don't start that, now," he scolded. "You are doing by far the most important part of this."

"Brewing the potion?"

"We did it together. We are doing all of this together. And that's why it's more important than anything they do. You're here with me. You love me, you hold me together. You let me love you." His arms around her were tight with strain and worry. "I didn't mention you because I want to protect you, too. If I can erase every sign that you were here at all, I'll do it. You're too precious to lose, Hermione. Don't you see that?"

"No," she said quietly. "But it's nice to know that someone can see it." Her hands stroked over his tense back. "I don't want to lose you, either. So save some of that protection for yourself, would you?"

"I keep telling you," he said with a cocky smile. "I'm not going to die in this fight. I'm going to win."

Hermione smiled and laid her cheek on his chest. "That's right. You are."

"We are," he corrected. "We'll mail this tomorrow. Let's eat."

They ate, and they rinsed their dishes in the stream that ran by their campsite, then settled down by the fire to study for several hours. The Polyjuice Potion was ready, it needed only the final ingredient, but that would have to wait until Tuesday. They didn't practice any of the spells they looked at, since they were trying to avoid using magic whenever possible.

Harry looked up from a book with his eyes feeling raw from the smoke of the fire he'd built. He honestly didn't mind this living rough—

it was rather cosy. But it would be nice to not have to brush ash off everything they owned whenever they wanted to use it.

“Let’s go to bed,” he said with a yawn. “I want to get up early, post the letter to Ernie quick enough that it will come at breakfast.”

So they did. After that first night, they’d seen no reason to change their sleeping arrangements, and now they were quite comfortable with sliding into their gigantic sleeping bag. No blushing, no awkwardness. It was the best sleep they’d ever gotten, laying there with their limbs entangled and not a trace of shame.

-o-o-o-

Harry and Hermione waited cautiously under the Invisibility Cloak until the figure was close enough to see clearly. He looked like Ron. He walked like Ron. Didn’t necessarily mean it was Ron. But he was here at the appointed time, just outside the property boundary of the Weasley’s family home. So they took the cloak off and stepped forward, fingers itchy for their wands.

“Harry, Hermione,” Ron said in surprise. “Wow, it’s really good to see you two! Everyone’s been worried!”

Harry gave him a very sober look. “Tell me something. Tell me what I gave Sirius for Christmas the year your father was in the hospital.”

Ron looked shocked, then he nodded in understanding. “Some of the twins’ products, wasn’t it? Skiving Snackboxes, I think.” He crossed his arms. “And what did you give me that year?”

“It was a broom servicing kit, but you didn’t deserve it, I’d already let you stay in my house.”

Ron grinned, held out his hand. They grasped hands, and thumped one another on the back. Ron offered Hermione a more delicate handshake.

“No one’s seen you since Minister Bones got elected over the summer. I wasn’t sure if you two were together somewhere or not. Are you with Professor Black?”

“Not right now, no.”

“Hermione and I are . . . we’ve separated ourselves from the others, to keep them safe. Anyway, we’re glad to see you’re doing all right. We haven’t had a way to hear any news, lately, but I was worried about what things were going to be like at school this year.”

Ron’s smile fell. “There’s a radio station you can listen to, a private one Lee Jordan’s running that requires a passcode, but the news is all bad.”

“Tell me, anyway,” Harry asked.

Ron soberly related the situation. The attacks targeting Muggleborn homes were the least of it. With Minister Bones not able to appear in public, the Wizengamot was rapidly taking over, and there were either Death Eaters or people under the Imperius curse among them—or so it would seem, based on their legislation. And at Hogwarts . . .

“It’s awful, right now. Purebloods only, and that means people are missing their friends and classrooms are missing some good input. Not that the classrooms are exactly a place to learn, anymore. The curriculum is all about blood purity, now. Muggle Studies has been made mandatory, and it’s a joke. I mean, I always thought Muggles were funny, but I know they aren’t cattle. Defense Against the Dark Arts is the worst, though. It’s not Defense anymore, just Dark. People are required to use the Cruciatus Curse on the other students. We’re supposed to practise it on people in detention. It’s ruddy awful. And if you refuse . . .” Ron shook his head, his face drawn with strain.

“Has anyone been badly hurt?”

“Just Neville, so far,” Ron said softly. “He steps in whenever being Head Boy allows him to, and sometimes even when it doesn’t. Both he and Veronica do it, especially when it’s one of the younger kids. And Madam Pomfrey isn’t allowed to treat us, so we take care of each other. We’re not exactly experts, you know? He’s going to wind

up looking like Mad-Eye Moody by the time this is all over. And Veronica refuses to let him be some kind of lone hero, and it's making her all noble and not-Slytherin. The two of them are at each other's throats, all the time, but they've been able to protect the little kids, so far. All of us prefects do what we can . . . When one of the teachers was torturing Ginny for sticking her nose in for a younger student, I almost got myself killed. Ernie and Terry were holding me back and telling me I couldn't help."

Hermione had pressed herself into Harry's side, her eyes full of tears. Harry put his arm around her and wished he could burrow into her and be comforted. Ron looked weary, and Harry knew it could only be worse for Neville. He thought of those little first-and-second years, watching in fear while the older students were tortured for their sakes, and he bit down on his tongue. He couldn't help. Not now. He had other work to do.

"Ron, I'm so sorry," he said quietly. "I'm working as fast as I can to bring Voldemort down, so we can end this. I promise."

Ron nodded. "Let's do this, then," he said, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a glass vial that would normally contain a potion. He continued to hold it, instead of handing it over. "What do you want with this, Harry? Why my dad?"

Harry shook his head. "It's better you don't know."

"And my dad? Shouldn't he know what you're going to do, acting as him?"

Harry frowned at that. It was something that had been troubling him. But having no truth to reveal, if dosed with Veritaserum, was the only way he could think of to protect them. He shook his head and pulled out a vial of his own, this one containing a potion.

"I need you to get inside tonight, and slip this into something your dad is eating or drinking."

Ron accepted the vial, opened it, and sniffed it cautiously. "Harry . . . this is poisonous."

"It's very mild," Harry explained. "It will make him sick, but only for a day or two."

"Why?"

"So that he's home from work. Just leave a note, somewhere he'll see it right away, that he's going to be seen at work tomorrow morning and then he'll go home sick."

Ron stared at the vial in his hand. "Harry, no."

Harry was dismayed, but not surprised. Ron had every right to refuse. He'd have to change his plans. Maybe he would be able to penetrate the defenses around this home, himself. Maybe there was someone else who worked for the Ministry he could use, even if there was no one else he trusted.

"I won't poison my father. Not until I know why."

"What?" Harry asked. He'd half-expected refusal, but not this.

"I will go along with what you want to do, but only if you tell me the plan. In fact, I want to help with the rest of it."

"No," Harry said adamantly. Beside him, Hermione opened her mouth, but shut it again when he said, "No way."

"Why not?"

"Because it's best if you aren't able to talk about it. If you don't know, you can't say, and you can't be harmed for your involvement."

Ron held one vial in each hand, and looked stubborn. "Did I tell you that I had Neville induct me into the Order of the Phoenix? He's part of it, you know."

"Yes, I knew he was. I didn't know you were."

"I'm of age. I can make my own decisions about my safety and just how far I want to go to save us. I'm already doing things that could

get me hurt or killed. Our new professors would love to kill me just for what I'm doing as a prefect. So this isn't going to be the one thing that signs my death warrant. I want to help, Harry. Surely the two of you can't do everything on your own?"

Harry looked down at Hermione, who was looking up at him with a strangely calm attitude. She seemed to think it was a good idea. And Harry had to admit, there were a few stages of this plan when an extra pair of hands and eyes would be needed.

"It's going to take some time. What are you going to do about explaining your absence at school?"

"Easy," Ron shrugged. "Dean can't attend this year, so he's taking Polyjuice and pretending to be me for a couple of days, until I get back. He and Seamus have been spending a lot of time holed up in the Room of Requirement, treating the wounded and keeping each other company. Seamus wanted to do it, but he couldn't get my voice right."

"You already arranged this?"

Ron grinned.

"Stupid, stubborn prat," Harry muttered. "All right. I'll tell you the plan. But first go in there and slip this to your dad. Take my cloak."

-O-O-O-

Getting into the Ministry had been easier than any other part of the endeavour, so far. He was a little nervous, but that was all to the good, since he was supposed to be coming down sick. He allowed himself to be a little pale and clammy.

It was surreal, walking around inside someone else's body. He'd been in disguise, but never quite like this. He'd never actually walked around in someone else's skin. Arthur was taller than him, flabbier, and he had big feet. It felt awkward.

But Harry wasn't here to contemplate the oddities of the Polyjuice potion. He was here to get something. And since Ron had talked him

around to including Arthur Weasley in his plans, it was going to be much easier. Harry had been armed with the name of a man in the Ministry whom he knew to be a Death Eater, since Snape and Sirius had discussed him once or twice. And Arthur was armed with information on how to get near him, when, and why. Yes, including Arthur made this much easier to pull off—not least of all because they didn't have to poison him, after all. But Harry still felt nagging guilt over it. The danger he was putting himself in was one thing. What he was doing to others was something else entirely.

But not now, because he needed to focus. He watched quietly in the foyer area of the Ministry building, the place where everyone arrived and departed, until he saw his target. He followed him to the caged lifts, and got on when he did. He pretended not to notice the other man until the carriage started moving. Then he pretended surprise, and he smiled.

“Ah, Markowicz, didn't see you there!” He gave the other man a jovial slap on the back. “I'm still waiting for that report from your department, you know.”

Markowicz scowled at him. “Why do you think I pressed the button for your floor, Weasley? I'm on my way to deliver it to you.” He shuffled in the leather satchel he carried. “Here.”

“No, no, I'll just spill my cup on it,” Harry protested, holding up the cup of tea he'd procured. “Just pop into my office with me, and I can check it before you go to make sure it has everything we need.”

Markowicz was unhappy, but couldn't think of a good argument, so they exited the lift together. Harry glanced quickly around the office, and was pleased to see that Arthur was right, he did always get there earlier than anyone else. When Markowicz held out the report, Harry shot his spell.

“Imperio!”

The man's eyes glazed. Well, it was Harry's first attempt, he didn't have the finesse to make it look good.

“Who do you report to?” Harry demanded. “Which Death Eater do you report your information to?” You want to tell me, you would love to tell me . . .

“Rodolphus Lestrangle,” Markowicz said in a dull voice.

“Yes,” Harry breathed. “When is your next scheduled meeting?”

“Tomorrow after work.”

“Where?”

“Hogsmeade.”

Harry was delighted. He released the spell, and Markowicz nearly fell over. “Obliviate,” he said, removing the last few moments from the man’s mind. He took the copy of the report from the man’s hands. “Thank you, Markowicz, this ought to be quite helpful.”

Markowicz was confused for a moment, casting around for something to say after the brief interruption in his brain. He settled on, “You look ghastly, Weasley.”

“I’m a bit under the weather,” Harry admitted.

“Well, I’ll thank you not to spread it around the whole building!” Markowicz snapped. “Why don’t you go home?”

Harry nodded gravely. “Might do, to be honest with you. Well, thanks for the report, in any case. I’ll just tuck it here in the inbox so the rest of the staff can work on it. I’d better go back home, then. Good day.”

Markowicz grunted, and stalked out. Harry very carefully departed as well, being sure to remark on how poorly he was feeling to a few of the people he ran into on his way out. None of them cared, they had enough troubles of their own. The aura of fear over this building was palpable and real, and made Harry feel genuinely sick. But safely in one sweaty palm, he clutched what he’d come for. The hair he’d plucked from Markowicz’s stringy mane when he’d slapped his back.

His ticket to see Rodolphus Lestrangle.

He met up with Hermione and Ron when he exited the building. He grinned triumphantly as he slipped the hair into the vial Hermione held out to him.

“He reports directly to Lestrangle,” he announced. “That will eliminate a step.”

The other two smiled back.

“What’s the plan for right now?”

Harry was beginning to lose his resemblance to Arthur. He could feel his body sucking itself into a new shape, and his hair prickled as it grew back in. He felt a bit weak in the knees.

“Now we get me a drink,” he declared. “We can’t do anything until the meeting tomorrow night. You two will waylay him while I meet with Lestrangle in Hogsmeade. Once you’ve got Markowicz safely tucked away for a couple of hours, you come to Hogsmeade to help me subdue Lestrangle.”

Hermione frowned. “What are we going to do if Lestrangle doesn’t know where the vault key is? What if Bellatrix is the only one who knows?”

Harry shrugged. “Then I’ll take one more dose of Polyjuice and meet up with her.”

Hermione shuddered. Ron gaped at him.

They agreed they could all use a drink or two. The plan for tonight was something Harry had yet to share.

-O-O-O-

“This part, I have to do alone,” Harry said gravely. Ron and Hermione were working on making dinner, which was fish (again) and a sort of

stew with wild mushrooms and herbs that they hoped would taste okay if soaked in enough butter.

“You haven’t told us what you’re doing,” Ron said complacently.

Hermione didn’t say anything, but her lips were pressed together in disapproval.

“I’m going to Malfoy Manor.”

“But you— you’re going— what?” Ron sputtered.

Hermione stood up.

“I have a way of getting there undetected,” Harry said with assurance. “I know it’s risky, but I have to do it. If I have to pretend to be Rodolphus, and meet up with Bellatrix, then I need to know how to behave around her. I’m going to observe them for a while and get an idea of how they talk, touch, and so on. When that bloke was pretending to be me, Hermione knew it wasn’t me inside a minute.”

“What bloke?” Ron asked.

Hermione grabbed Harry’s elbow and yanked him into their tent.

“You are not doing this,” she hissed.

Harry cast a Muffliato charm. “Are you denying it’s necessary?”

“No, I’m not, but I won’t let you do it. We’ll come up with another plan, Harry, because there is no way that I am letting you go alone to Malfoy Manor, as an owl or otherwise!”

Harry smiled. “I knew you’d figure out what I was going to do.”

Hermione glared at him.

“Hermione, this has to be done. We have to have that Horcrux. Simply breaking into their vault would be disaster at best, and suicide at worst. We have to be able to do this. In fact, it’s better if I have her

hair, too. That way we can go into Gringotts together. And if we're going to do this, I have to be able to walk right into her presence and give nothing away. I have to go spy on them. We don't have a choice."

"We do have a choice."

"It's the choice between succeeding and not succeeding. We don't have any allies in the bank, and I'm not about to risk breaking in. It has to be this way."

Hermione left the tent, and went back to help Ron put together the food. He hadn't been able to hear anything, but he still blushed so much that his ears turned red. The silence over the campsite was very, very awkward. Harry prepared to leave in silence, but as he walked far enough away from the campsite to Apparate, Hermione came rushing after him, and threw her arms around him.

"We can't part on bad terms," she said. "Not ever."

He gave her a very soft kiss. "I'll be back."

"I know you will."

He Apparated a nice, easy distance from Malfoy Manor, the location of which he'd wheedled from Draco ages ago in the event it was ever needed. Then he transformed into an owl, and soared over the tall hedges, and was on the property completely undetected within moments.

He was half-wild with nerves, but he forced himself to go slowly, and see everything. There were (of all the stupid, ostentatious ways to waste your money) albino peacocks wandering about the premises. He should be grateful for them. It was likely their presence that made his own possible—the Malfoy wards excluded birds. Harry tilted his wings and swooped towards the back gardens, thinking a rear entrance might be safer than trying to wing through the front door.

He looked at everything as he went. Knowing things about this house might save his life at some point. He looked in all the windows as he

went by, noting what they contained. Say, windows would make things easy. Maybe they had left a window open for him . . .

As it turned out, he didn't need a window. The Lestranges were sitting on a marble bench, in a piece of garden near the house but separated from the kitchen garden by a decorative hedge. Harry, feeling reckless with his success in getting this far, perched himself silently on that hedge, and watched.

He counted himself grateful that Rodolphus Lestrange seemed to be a very level-headed individual. They were speaking of a plan to invade someone's home and kill them, two nights from now, and Rodolphus showed none of his wife's mad glee about it. Of course, he was still discussing the violent death of innocent people, but he seemed like a sociopath of the sort that simply didn't see anything wrong with murder. He didn't seem to have any real joy in it, nor in anything else. It was more to the point for him that it would please Voldemort, and Bellatrix. He was the kind of guy who pleased others to make his own life easier. If they were happy, his life went smoothly.

Yes, Harry was grateful for that. He would find it easier to act out the part of Rodolphus than a lot of the other Death Eaters. But he was entirely dismayed to find out that he and his wife were very attracted to one another. It was a little bit sickening to watch, but Harry forced himself to do so. He had to know, so he could pull this off.

She liked to play with his beard, Harry noted. And he liked to play with her breasts, which was a lot more disgusting to file away for his use. Apparently the way she licked her Dark Mark was supposed to be a turn on, since Rodolphus bent his head to kiss her.

Then, very abruptly, she was done playing. She jumped up from the bench, laughing in weirdly uncertain way that chilled him.

"Come on, we've work to do."

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," Rodolphus said sourly, getting up.

“Our lord has been generous enough to allow us this time. We will not try his patience,” she said sharply.

“No,” he agreed, getting up himself.

Bellatrix suddenly whipped her head around and drew her wand. She stared around into the dark wildly. Rodolphus followed suit, wand held at the ready and eyes straining against the darkness.

“What?” he asked.

Harry tucked his wings in as far as he could, and tried to be smaller than he was. Damn him for being such a large breed of owl! But a peacock stepped out from between two shrubs, and the Lestranges relaxed. Rodolphus put his wand away, although Bellatrix turned hers toward the white bird with a snarl on her lips. Rodolphus laid a hand on her arm, making her turn her head.

“Lucius would throw a fit,” he said.

Bellatrix put her wand away with a scowl, and they walked up the path toward the huge house.

Then Rodolphus lunged at her and shoved her up against the wall of the manor with a growl of desire. “They can wait a few minutes,” he grunted, fumbling with her skirt, making her scrape her bare skin against the house. She hissed in pain.

“Merlin, you’re gorgeous when you’re bleeding,” he mumbled, sliding a hand over her bared, scraped thigh.

“Yes,” she said simply.

Harry decided to get the hell out of there. They were too distracted to see him go, and he flew halfway back to the campsite before he remembered that he could transform back into a person and Apparate. He stumbled through the wards they’d placed with his gut feeling pinched and heavy.

Hermione and Ron were sitting at the fireplace. Hermione was taking the opportunity of having someone who was going through the curriculum to get some questions answered about NEWT studies. But they both jumped to their feet and turned his way when they saw him coming.

“Harry?”

“I need a shower,” Harry said firmly. “I need soap. Lots of soap.”

Soap they had, but not a shower, so Harry settled for washing his hands in their stream. The act of it, the calming motion of doing something so familiar, settled him. But his stomach was still twisted up in knots. He didn’t know how he was going to pull off pretending to be Rodolphus, not when he had to be married to her.

-O-O-O-

Harry didn’t know that the proprietor of the Hog’s Head was the one who’d given Ron a means in and out of the school—Ron hadn’t relayed the information, and Harry hadn’t asked. They hadn’t yet had time for such details. But Harry knew a little about Aberforth Dumbledore simply through knowing his brother, and he couldn’t understand why the man would allow nasty types like Lestrangle and Markowicz to hold meetings in his establishment.

Of course, denying them could mean more trouble than it was really worth, so . . . Harry supposed he had some sympathy for the man. In any case, his business tonight wasn’t Aberforth, it was Rodolphus. Hermione and Ron were hiding Markowicz’s unconscious form somewhere out of the way until this meeting was over with, so they should be waiting outside the Hog’s Head in only a minute or two. For now, Harry was on his own.

He didn’t like being Markowicz. The stringy feeling of the hair on his neck was awful, and his skin was dry and itchy. He had a better build than Arthur, but he didn’t have Harry’s lean form that was built for endurance. Harry would gladly take on Markowicz in a fight, any day. He’d wear himself out before Harry had broken a sweat.

When Rodolphus Lestrangle walked into the dirty, dingy little pub and took a seat at the faded and scarred table, Harry felt that assurance evaporate. Here was a man who would be a dangerous opponent. He was handsome, in a swarthy and sneering sort of way, with a deep chest and big arms. Harry didn't want to bet on his chances of taking Lestrangle alone, so he hoped Ron and Hermione were hurrying. He didn't have anything to report, so he wouldn't be able to stall for long.

"Markowicz," Lestrangle said in a low, rumbling voice. "What do you have for me?"

Harry made a lazy gesture, and tried to look bored. "Ah, relax, why don't you? Have a drink. We're the only ones here, might as well take our time. Won't kill you, Lestrangle." In demonstration, he took a long swallow of his own drink, thanking his lucky stars that they were the only patrons. Aberforth Dumbledore came stumping over with a scowl, smelling as sour as his pet goat and making Harry grimace. He thunked a tankard down in front of Lestrangle and departed again without a word.

Lestrangle frowned at both the drink and his presumed colleague, stroking his neatly-trimmed beard with thumb and forefinger. "Fine," he said at last. He grinned, in a sly way. "Bella always likes to taste the alcohol on my breath, anyway."

Harry could sense, in the delivery, that he was being goaded in some way. Did Markowicz not like Bellatrix? Harry had sympathy, if that were so. Or was it more that Markowicz had a thing for her and her husband liked rubbing it in? Gross. Whatever it was, Harry figured he was safe with scowling and mumbling and taking a big swig. Lestrangle seemed to get a kick out of it, anyway. Hopefully it would keep him in a good enough mood that Harry wouldn't be forced to report immediately.

They drank in silence for a minute, until Harry was certain that his friend and his girlfriend were outside. He stirred, a bit. No need for any sort of violence unless it were necessary. He'd try to do it peacefully (and illegally, and Darkly) first.

“Well, Markowicz? Do you have a bloody report, or are you just here to look pretty?”

“Imperio,” Harry whispered.

It didn’t take. Lestrangle’s eyes bugged, then he leapt out of his seat, causing Harry to leap up, himself. “You dare! You little twerp! You—” He stopped in surprise when Harry, unused to the body he found himself in, nearly fell when getting up. “You’re not Markowicz,” he growled.

Before Lestrangle could get his wand up, Harry was running. “Not in my pub!” Aberforth was shouting, and Lestrangle was sending curses at him, but Harry was weaving past the tables as he ran, and he flung himself through the door with desperation, hoping with all his heart that his allies were on the other side because this body was not built for running.

“Stupefy!” two voices said simultaneously. Lestrangle hit the dirt, Harry went to his knees and grabbed the man’s arm, and all four of them Disapparated before Aberforth could peek out to see anything.

-O-O-O-

When Rodolphus Lestrangle woke up, he was bound with ropes. He was laying on the floor of some empty building, all concrete and only two windows up near the ceiling. He was unable to move and diagnosed himself as being Petrified—and his wand was being twirled in the hands of a very recognizable person.

“Potter,” he growled. “Harry bleeding Potter. You’re the one who got to Markowicz? What are you playing at, boy?”

Potter gave him an indolent look, tucking his into the pocket of Muggle jeans. He was also wearing a filthy Muggle t-shirt. He sported a dueling holster on each forearm, both filled by a wand. Rodolphus allowed himself a brief moment to wonder what the devil Potter was doing with two wands, then reminded him that Potter currently had three and there were bigger problems to worry about.

“I need some information from you.”

Rodolphus laughed, which due to his Petrification made his chest feel tight. He suddenly noticed that his chest was entirely bare. Where were his clothes? Was this supposed to be intimidating? “You need information, so you’ve ambushed me and taken me captive? Maybe we ought to be less focused on trying to kill you and more on recruiting you.”

Oh, that had to smart. Potter’s jaw was clenched down hard. But then he smiled.

“At least I’m not going to kill you, Lestrangle.”

That didn’t make any sense. “Why the devil wouldn’t you? Unless you and your cronies can’t handle it. Who was it, anyway, that got me outside the pub?”

“No one you need to be concerned about,” Potter said harshly. He used one of his wands to conjure up a chair, and he sat on it, leaving Rodolphus on the ground. “Let’s talk.”

“Better yet, why don’t you fuck off, you upstart little git?”

Potter leaned back with a lazy grin. “Is that what’s got you upset? Not that someone bested you, but that it was some youngster like me? Don’t feel too bad, Lestrangle. I’m actually quite skilled for my age. Most students don’t get the opportunity to practice Binding spells.”

Rodolphus wondered if he was supposed to feel privileged to have been captured by a child prodigy, but he thought now might be a good time to shut up and say not a word more until Potter got tired of playing his game. He was a child. It wouldn’t be long.

Potter reached into his pocket and withdrew something. A vial. He couldn’t see what was in it, but when Potter stood up and came to him, he realised he was meant to drink it. When Potter knelt down, he strained against his ropes and against the Petrifying spell over his body. Without his wand, it was sort of pointless, but struggling was the only delay against drinking the contents of that vial.

It lasted only until Potter grabbed his hair and yanked his head back so that he was forced to swallow or choke when the vial was tipped into his throat. He swallowed by reflex and tried to bite Potter's hand. A strange feeling spread over him. Things would be all right, wouldn't they? All he had to do was say the right thing, and everything would be fine.

"What is your name?"

He didn't know why Potter was asking, but that was an easy one. "Rodolphus Julian Lestrangle."

"Are you married?"

"Yes." He shouldn't say anything more. He didn't want to. Why did he feel like he had to? That wasn't right.

"Whom to?"

"To Bellatrix Lestrangle, nee Black, the daughter of—"

"Yes, that's quite enough," Potter interrupted.

Wait, how could he be interrupting when Rodolphus didn't want to say anything? The truth of the liquid he'd been forced to drink became clear. How dare he? How did he even get his hands on it? The little twit had fed him Veritaserum!

"I'm curious, Potter, where you procured a controlled substance."

"That's none of your concern, Lestrangle. You're just going to answer my questions."

"No."

Potter just smiled, sitting back in his chair and seeming to enjoy himself.

"You have a vault at Gringotts."

It wasn't a question. He didn't have to answer it.

"Does your vault contain a cup given to you by Tom Riddle, also known as the Dark Lord Voldemort?"

Rodolphus bared his teeth and growled. But . . . "Yes," he grunted. He didn't want to say it. It just came out. Although he hadn't actually known that his master had that name. It was so common—but no. Nothing about his lord was common. Nothing.

"Describe the cup to me."

"It's shiny," he bit out.

Surprisingly, Potter just smiled. "Where is the key to your vault?"

No, no, no. He wouldn't. He wouldn—"Bellatrix keeps it on a chain around her neck."

Potter seemed to find that amusing. "Why?"

Rodolphus shook his head. He didn't have to speculate, did he?

"What is your wife's professed reason for doing so?"

Damn the little twit forever. "She says that she must keep it on her person because it represents a task given to her by the master. She calls it a talisman of power. Something our lord said to her that he did not share with me."

Potter seemed to mull over that for a moment. Then he shrugged. "Okay. Thanks. That's all."

Rodolphus was incredulous. Potter had gone to the trouble of impersonating Markowicz and then kidnapping him, just to find out where they kept an heirloom for their master? Harry Potter had broken the law, just to find out that no matter how badly he might want it, he was never getting access to their vault. And now Potter

had him to deal with, and Potter had to know that Rodolphus was going to have his revenge.

It was too funny. Rodolphus began to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Potter snapped.

Still under Veritaserum, and perfectly happy to tell the truth in this case, Rodolphus explained as much as he could through bursts of laughter. And at that, something happened that angered Rodolphus more than ever. Potter smiled, and got up off the chair, and went to the door of the concrete building. He was leaving. Like Rodolphus didn’t even matter.

“I’ll be right back in,” he said conversationally. “But we won’t be talking again. I’m simply going to keep an eye on you while my colleagues carry something out.”

“Too afraid to join them, are you, Potter?”

Potter quirked his lips. “Yes,” he said softly. “Yes, you’ve got it exactly right, Lestranger.”

The boy was playing with him, thinking he could have such disrespect for him as to cheek him that way . . .

“I’m going to kill you, Potter,” he vowed. He made sure their eyes were locked while he spoke. It seemed to scare people more to see how much he meant what he said. “And when you are dead, I will cut off your head and stick it on a pole and carry it around as a walking stick so that I can show off your decomposing flesh like a trophy.” He would, too. He wasn’t saying it just to intimidate. It would be only too easy to do, and it gave him a little thrill to think of those dead eyes staring at him like they were confirming that he’d carried out his promise.

Potter abruptly strode out and slammed the door. Rodolphus felt smug. He might be the one tied up on the ground, but he’d won this round.

-O-O-O-

Harry looked at Ron with his mouth and eyes gone hard and cold.

"Sit on the other side of the room. Don't speak to him at all. Just renew the charms to keep him Petrified and tied up once in a while. Hopefully I won't be long."

Ron nodded. "I will." He moved toward the door of the abandoned warehouse they were using.

"Seriously, Ron. Don't say anything to him." As Harry spoke, he was pulling on the clothes they'd taken off Lestrage while he was unconscious. They were loose on him. "He is going to try to goad you. He is going to say horrible things, about you or your family . . . don't take the bait. If he does manage to escape us, I want him to think I was the one in there with him the whole time, not you. If you talk, he'll know it's not me. Okay?"

"Harry, I know," Ron said in concern. "Hermione and I can handle him."

Harry let out an exasperated breath. "Yeah, you can. Sorry."

Hermione laid her hand on his shoulder. "What did he say to you?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing. Well, nothing important. But he's insane, and horrible, and . . . And now I have to go become him for a little while."

Hermione kissed his cheek. "You'll be back. And you'll be okay. I know you will."

Harry nodded. "Yeah." He pushed her away. "Stop being so good to me, I can't respond properly right now."

Hermione's hand on him was tight and unyielding. "We never part on bad terms, Harry."

"Then kiss me goodbye and let me go for a while," he said quietly.

She did. He and Ron looked at one another and drank their Polyjuice Potion, then watched as they made their transformation. Ron shrank a few inches, his hair darkened, a jagged scar sank into the flesh of his forearm and forehead. Harry didn't grow in height any significant amount, but his body deepened and became broad and sprouted more hair. He slowly filled out the robes he was wearing. He judged the body of Lestrangle more pleasant to wear than that of Markowicz, but he couldn't say he was going to enjoy it.

He looked at the two gravely, then concentrated on making his eyes right. Lestrangle had shown some anger, but even that was detached. The only time he'd been completely serious was when he'd vowed to make Harry's dessicated head part of his daily wardrobe. Harry looked at Hermione and Ron, made himself see useless sacks of meat, a blood traitor and a Mudblood who were not worth the air they were breathing. The two of them, who were watching him with concern as he continued to stand there silently, both began to pale and draw away from him.

He spun around to go. "Don't speak, Ron," he said brusquely. He Apparated to Malfoy Manor, held Lestrangle's wand out to the gate, and walked right through the front door. He was so scared that there was a real danger of losing his bowels, but he refused to feel it. The fear was a distant thing. Lestrangle didn't know fear of anything but his master. This was the house he lived in now, so he belonged here. He could stride through the hall if he wanted to.

He knew which part of the house people slept in, since he'd seen it last night on his scouting mission. He didn't know which room he was supposed to be in, so he just walked until he found Bellatrix. She was wearing a really ugly floor-length nightie of deep purple. It did nothing but make her face look even more ravaged and hollow than it already was.

She turned when she heard his movement.

"Dolph," she said with a frown. "What are you doing in here? Have you already finished reporting about your meeting with Markowicz?"

“Yes,” he said simply. “He had nothing of note, nothing but the same trash he’s been giving us for weeks.” He tried to sneer appropriately, and he refused to feel his heart pounding. He crossed the room and dropped himself into a richly upholstered chair. His brief glance around the room told him that he did not sleep here. Bellatrix slept alone. Well, honestly, what was the point of being married then?

She seemed to accept his explanation, but she was still frowning at him. “What do you want?”

“Had to look at that rat Markowicz for an hour, thought I’d like to see something a little more aesthetically pleasing.”

Okay, so there were women a lot more aesthetically pleasing than the bony woman with glittering, mad eyes. But he was married to this one, and she’d been rather beautiful when she was young.

She didn’t seem like she was buying it. Obviously he was not supposed to enjoy just sitting in his wife’s room and watch her get ready for bed. And, well, he would have to get up close to her sooner or later. Much as it churned his stomach, it had to be done. He stood back up, and walked toward her with a powerful stride, making her back up a step.

“I didn’t finish what I started last night,” he growled.

She didn’t look happy, but he’d crowded her up against the wall and his broad shoulders prevented an escape unless she wanted to hex him. Which she very well might. He acted before she could try. He gripped her shoulders, bent his head, and ran his mouth along her neck. She went very still. Then he took her earlobe in his mouth and bit down until he tasted blood.

She shuddered. “Oh,” she breathed out.

He went to work as fast as possible. One hand gripped the back of her neck painfully, holding her in place, while the other kneaded her breast through the horrible purple nightgown. And his clever fingers slipped the chain free of her neck and replaced it with a key that opened nothing but a glass cabinet in Number Twelve, Grimmauld

Place. His mouth was at work licking at the blood on her ear, but he was perfectly positioned to see the hair that was stuck in the clasp on the chain. It was all exactly right.

She had her hands under his shirt and was raking her nails over his back, raising lines of fire. God, she probably had poison on those fingers, he would die of an infection or something.

He straightened up abruptly, releasing her. "I'm being called," he bit out. "Apparently my report is not finished."

Bellatrix was open-mouthed and looked angry, but then her eyes began to gleam. "Perhaps there is a raid tonight." She looked down at her own Mark in eagerness, but frowned petulantly. "I am not invited."

"I don't think it's a raid," he said. "He must have a question for me. Perhaps he wishes to plan an invasion of the Ministry."

Her eyes gleamed again at that. "Then hurry, Dolph. Don't keep him waiting."

He nodded curtly, raked his eyes over her dishevelment, the blood on her neck. "We'll finish this later."

He strode out. He went down the hall, saw a man who looked a great deal like him coming toward him. He recalled that he had a brother, Rabastan. He nodded to the other man, who was thinner and less hairy, but shared his jaw and nose.

"Got to go out for a bit," he muttered. "Master has another question for that rat Markowicz."

Rabastan looked unsurprised, and let him go. He walked out of the house, and Apparated back to the warehouse, and walked inside, walking right past where Hermione sat guard outside the door. He saw Ron, still looking like Harry Potter, sitting silently as instructed. Rodolphus Lestrange lay on the floor, also silent, his eyes glaring holes into his captor. When he saw the person coming toward him, they flew wide with shock.

“You . . . what have you done?” he shouted. “What is this?”

He went the corner of the room, grabbed his Invisibility Cloak. He shucked off the clothes, and used a charm to put them back on Lestrangle (it was a spell that mothers used on their two-year-olds, which had amused him at one time but did not now), all the while listening to Lestrangle holler the most gruesome death threats he never could have imagined. Then he grabbed Lestrangle and Apparated back to the Manor.

He threw the Cloak over his head, disappeared. Then he pointed the Elder Wand at Lestrangle and modified his memory. He took away everything that had happened in the first meeting with Markowicz and all of the warehouse. He replaced it as best he could with his own memory of being with Bellatrix and being called away. Lestrangle’s eyes were glassy and shocked. Finally, he let Lestrangle’s wand fall onto the ground at his feet.

He Disapparated. In his absence, the binding spells over Lestrangle broke, and he was under his own power again. Lestrangle felt extremely fuzzy for a moment, which he did not understand. Then he remembered that he’d been forced to go to Markowicz and get some more information from him. Lucky for him, Markowicz had still been at that pigsty of a tavern, enjoying a final drink before going home.

He must have had more to drink than he remembered, with his head feeling the way it did. How had he managed to drop his wand? Even if he was dead drunk, he never thought he’d do that. He wasn’t going to drink any more, not if this was what happened. He went inside and went to his room. His brother and his wife shared this hall with him, but he didn’t bother them. His head was clearing up now, but he felt exhausted, for some reason. He just needed to get some sleep.

-o-o-o-

They had made what they thought was a gigantic batch of Polyjuice Potion, meaning to have some left over in case they needed it again. They hadn’t reckoned on how much they needed for this plan. They joked about the health risks of transforming into so many different people in such a short space of time, but when they faced one

another with the last vials in their hands they couldn't find it funny anymore.

Ron, who had done nothing but dye his hair and undergo a very minor Shrinking spell to make him a few inches shorter, watched them. Harry and Hermione gave one another a long look, trying to share what strength they had.

"Bottoms up," Harry sighed.

They drank. Then they Apparated.

At Gringotts bank, a goblin took a key from the hand of Bellatrix Lestrange, and escorted the husband and wife to their vault, with their servant trailing behind them. A nondescript, runtish young man, not the sort the goblin would have expected to serve them. The pair went inside, gave the goblin a very pointed look, and the goblin retreated. He and the servant stood out on the rock ledge and waited. From inside his robe, Rodolphus produced a cup with the badge of Helga Hufflepuff on it. After a brief search of the vault (during which they discovered that the Lestranges had more money than they'd been given credit for), they located a cup that looked just like the one they'd brought with them.

Taking no chances, they used his walking stick to pick up the cup, and she set down the exact likeness in its place. He tucked the new one under his robes, and they gave one another a truly exultant smile. They'd done it.

-O-O-O-

Rodolphus woke up and decided to head downstairs to look for something to eat. It was going to be a long day, he thought. There would be a raid tonight on some Muggleborns, and they were supposed to take Greyback's wolves with them. It was going to be a particularly bloody slaughter. He didn't care about the blood, it was just blood. But he hated Greyback. Greyback was so visceral and uncouth. No manners at all.

His wife accosted him in the hall. "You never came back last night."

He thought back to the night before. He'd been with her for a while, hadn't he? "I had to go back to the tavern and speak to Markowicz again. I was tired."

"Speak to him about what?" she insisted. He hated that. She was an attractive woman, but she never left him alone. Nagging shrew is what she was.

"I don't know," he muttered, trying to walk away. "It was late, I'd had a few ales. I barely remember what I said to our master."

"You never drink, Dolph," she said in firm voice. "Why did you? You should be able to remember."

Horrible woman, but maybe she was right. Last night was a bit too fuzzy. Why was that?

"You don't think Markowicz slipped me something?" he asked with narrow eyes.

"Why would he?" she shot back. "No, there is something else, here, something I'm not seeing . . ." She kneaded her hand over the back of her neck, like she did when she was thinking. Then she froze, with her hand stuck there. "There's something wrong."

"What?"

"With my necklace." She fumbled with the clasp, and her brittle control began to fragment. He'd seen it before. The insanity was taking over. She began to giggle. "This is not my necklace," she said. "This is a fake!"

"Don't be ridiculous," he scowled.

She was abruptly right in front of him with her fingers gripping his arm painfully hard. "Where were you last night?" she hissed, her laughter gone.

He didn't know. He thought he did, but it seemed surreal.

“That wasn’t you, in my room. It was someone else.” She looked down at the chain in her hand. “Our vault!” she roared.

-O-O-O-

Just when Harry was beginning to breathe easy, Ron poked his face in. His eyes were wild with panic.

“We’ve got company!”

Harry’s stomach lurched. He’d thought, he’d really thought, that they would get away with it.

“Death Eaters. The real Lestranges, and some friends.” Ron was practically jibbering with panic.

Harry did the only thing he could think of to do. He swept his arms out and began throwing the pile of treasure around the vault. Now discovered as imposters, the wards on the vault went off. The coins, the heirlooms, it all began to multiply and become super-heated. In moments, they had to run from the vault to avoid being buried under a mountain of fake, searing treasure. Hermione was shrieking at him, but the confusion was necessary. They ducked out into the open space, and saw six Death Eaters, intent on murder, barreling toward them.

“Time to remember your lessons!” Harry shouted.

And spells began to fly. Jets of light bounced everywhere, and very few of them landed on people. The goblin ran for it, probably to get his colleagues to roust them all out. No time for him. Harry had the Elder Wand, and he began to gain the upper hand. He got one he didn’t recognize with a Stunner. He was holding off Rabastan Lestrangle, who was beginning to sweat. But the three of them against five Death Eaters, including Bellatrix, was too much. He threw himself flat on the ground, and pointed his wand far down the cavernous route deeper into the vault.

“Confringo!” he screamed.

An enormous roar echoed back at him. He'd hit the dragon.

He cast more spells, straining himself to make them go as far as possible. He heard the dragon squealing, roaring, and then he heard the most welcome noise possible. The rumble of falling stones. And the ground began to tremble.

The dragon came roaring up toward them. The Death Eaters were caught. They could not battle both the thieves and the dragon, and the dragon was currently breathing fire at them. Harry, just in time, got a shield up against Rabastan's panicked spell, and took him out when he was distracted by another roar from the dragon. He pulled two small sticks from his pocket. With a tap of his wand, they became broomsticks.

"Ron!" he shouted. He threw one broom. Ron caught it and stared at it with shock. "Let's go!" Ron nodded and jumped on. Harry grabbed Hermione and yanked her on behind him. "Disillusion us!" he demanded of her. She did. Invisible, the three of them wove through fire and falling stone and made their escape.

Chapter Eighteen

Harry and Ron stood facing each other beside the campfire where they'd done their studying and planning for the past two days. Hermione was technically standing there, but she wasn't facing anyone, she was tucked under Harry's arm, staring off into the distance, and clutching at his shirt.

"We're going to pack up and move camp," Harry said at last. "That way you can't give away our location, if anything comes up."

Ron nodded soberly. He was still gripping the handle of the broom he'd ridden to safety when they'd escaped the combination of Death Eaters, enraged dragon, and security goblins an hour ago.

"Ron," Harry said slowly, making sure their eyes met. "Thank you. Everything you've done, you have no idea how much it's helped. So . . . thank you."

Ron smiled crookedly. "Don't suppose you're going to tell me what you stole from the vault."

Harry smiled back, more widely. "Nothing."

Ron's smile fell away. "What?"

"They'll check their records and find that it's all there. Every bit of it."

Ron's grip on the broom tightened, whitening his knuckles. "If you didn't steal something from that vault, then why did we all risk our lives over the past couple of days?"

"I can't tell you that, Ron."

"You don't even realise how many people are in danger because of this, do you? Neville knows I'm missing and they'll beat it out of him. Then Dean will get hung up and flayed for this! I poisoned my own dad—"

“He agreed. You all agreed to this, even though I wanted to leave you out of it. Ron, listen to me. You wanted in on this, and I am more grateful than you know for your help. But this is as far as it goes. Look at me, and Hermione! We’ve had to drop out of school, move out of our homes, and go into hiding for this. Hermione actually modified her parents’ memory and sent them away to keep them safe. Is that what you want? To be part of this? Because that’s what you’re asking for, if you want to know what it was we were really doing today. There is so much that I’m not going to tell you, and it’s not because I don’t trust you. It’s because you don’t want to know.”

Ron had gone pale, and at the end of Harry’s reprimand, he nodded. “Okay, Harry. I get it.”

“Do you?” Harry said dismissively. He doubted that. But his attitude made Ron take a step forward, and fix him with a hard look.

“We all thought there was something sort of off about you, this whole time.” Ron’s voice sounded awkward, and he was blushing, but he had to speak. “That you were just a weird cookie, probably because of how unstable your upbringing was. All the guys joked about how intense you are. You know, how you work so hard, how you’re always so dire about everything. You go around acting like the world’s about to end and you’ve got to be ready. We liked you and everything, but we thought it was funny.”

“Glad to know I could amuse you,” Harry sneered. Honestly, after what had just happened down in the Gringotts vaults, this was what Ron had to say? He’d known he wasn’t just a regular guy like his mates in the dormitory at school, he didn’t need it pointed out to him.

“But that’s not exactly the right way to see it. I understand that now,” Ron ploughed onward doggedly. “It’s more like you were the only one who could see that the world was really ending, and we were just sitting there with our heads stuck up our arses. Just not listening. Because now . . .” He stopped to search for words. “Now something really bad is happening, and you are the only one who knows. You kept trying to show us, and we weren’t hearing you. Things are totally falling apart. I’ve been watching it happen! But I still didn’t see it, until now. It’s not that you’re weird. It’s that the rest of us should have

been! Neville got it all along, didn't he? And we made fun of him, too." Ron looked anguished. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

Harry was so surprised that he didn't say anything. At least not until Hermione pinched his side, making him jerk. He bit down on his yelp of pain, and just tightened his arm around her gratefully.

"I . . . that means a lot to me, Ron. Thank you."

"I've got to get back," Ron said, his face bright red and his eyes on the ground. "Before Dean gets found out."

"Who knows you're gone?" Harry asked curiously.

"Just Neville, Dean, and Seamus. We didn't even tell my sister."

"Are she and Dean still dating?"

"Why do you think Dean is sticking so close to the castle, instead of going to ground?" Ron shrugged.

Harry snorted. "I'm pretty sure your sister already knows you've been gone."

"Well, I probably should have told her, anyway."

"Did you tell them where you were going?"

"No. Well, Neville knows, since you sent him that letter. But I didn't tell the other guys why I was leaving."

Harry was impressed by Ron's ability to keep secrets. He'd already known that Ron was a brave soul, but he was realising more and more that Ron was quite a guy. Maybe he should have been in on this all along, he was a really valuable ally. Well, it was too late for that now. Much too late. They were nearing the end, and there was no sense putting Ron's life on the line when they were rounding the last corner.

“Goodbye, and thank you,” Harry said, shaking Ron’s hand firmly. Hermione shook his hand as well, and thanked him, her first words since they’d escaped. Ron departed.

They turned back to the tent, and began packing up their stuff. They shoved everything in Hermione’s bag, and Harry felt a bit of regret about having to leave this spot. It was convenient, sure, with its location so close to water and so secluded, but it was more than that. He and Hermione had been here together, just the two of them, for more than a month. Cooking meals, studying for the NEWTs they would never take, sleeping in one another’s arms . . . But he could hardly afford to be sentimental. A new location would serve them just as well.

When everything was tucked away inside the bag, Harry finally withdrew the cup from his robes. He gave Hermione a grim look.

“Let’s take care of this now.”

She nodded, and rummaged inside the bag. She wore a look of deep concentration, but she muttered under her breath. When she continued to rummage without being able to locate anything, Harry reached out his hand to help.

“I’ve got it!” she snapped at him.

He stepped back.

She triumphantly withdrew one of their precious vials of basilisk venom, and then dropped it on the ground. With another mutter, she swooped down to pick it up, and she thrust it into Harry’s hands as though she were glad to be rid of it.

“Hermione? Are you okay?”

She cast a scathing look over their empty campsite. “Of course. I’m fine,” she answered in a voice so thick with sarcasm that Harry could practically see it floating on the air.

Okay, that was a dumb question. No, she's not all right, and truth be told, I'm not either. But we don't talk to each other like that. We never do. Something's up.

"Are you ready to do this?"

She nodded, settling the strap of her bag more firmly on her shoulder. "Do it."

Harry took the cap off the vial, and poured the contents inside the cup. It began to hiss and steam. Harry swirled the liquid around, and grimaced at the rising smoke, turning his head to the side.

"I can actually feel his soul leaving," he whispered, trying not to let his voice quiver. It was a nasty, dirty feeling.

But then it was over. The buried the cup in the ashes of their fire, and Harry pulled a map of the area out of his pocket.

"Let's go."

They picked out a spot on their map, and Apparated to several locations near it before they actually Apparated to their destination. They knew that an Apparation trail fades in only a few moments, but paranoia had been working for them and they weren't about to give it up now.

Harry was (out of a sense of his self-condemned sentimentality, no doubt) beginning to set up their new campsite by making the bed in the tent. Hermione was laying out their books in an orderly stack atop a spare blanket, which she would fold over the top of them to keep the dirt off until they wanted to study. She was still looking grim and upset. Harry wondered what he'd done wrong, because he obviously had done something.

Hermione reached into the bag and began pulling out some canned food. Harry cautiously crouched down next to her.

"Hermione? Can I be honest?"

“Always,” she said in a hard voice.

“I’m not really hungry. Are you?”

“No,” she said, but her hands continued to unpack the food.

He laid his hands gently over hers, and found that they were shaking. He was surprised that he hadn’t seen the fine trembling that was coursing through her whole body, but feeling it destroyed his annoyance with her.

“Will you be honest with me?” he asked softly.

“About what?”

“Why didn’t you tell me that you’re scared and you could use some comfort?”

She jerked her hands away. “I’m not.”

“Not scared?”

“Yes. Why would I be? We’re fine.”

Harry closed his eyes until he could get a grip. “Oh, Hermione. I was afraid, too. It doesn’t make you weak or whatever it is that you’re thinking. That whole situation was scary.”

She finally looked at him, and her eyes were swimming with tears. “I thought we were going to die,” she said, and she sounded confused. “I really did. I still can’t believe we’re here and not dead. But I can’t fall apart now, I really can’t. There’s still so much left to do.”

Harry felt like there was more the story, and it was maddening to have Hermione acting so taciturn with him. I will not read her mind. I will not read her mind. I will not read her mind.

“Is that why you are being short with me?”

She clenched her jaw. “No.”

“Will you tell me why, then?”

“No. It’s something that isn’t logical, and I need to work it out on my own.”

Harry, still crouching next to her, felt like they were trying to shout at one another from across a massive canyon. Like they were miles apart. And he hated that.

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t be like that. There isn’t any part of you that I don’t want to know about. And there is nothing for you to work through that I’m not willing to help with.”

Hermione let out a sharp breath, and the look in her eyes made him shrink. “You came back with that key, and you smelled like her.”

He knew what she meant. “But Hermione, we knew before I went that I’d have to take it from her neck. You don’t think I wanted to, do you?”

“No,” she snapped. “I told you it isn’t logical! I just . . . it’s only that . . . you’re mine, and she touched you! And you let her! And it’s horrible, that even when we were being attacked, I wasn’t so much afraid, as angry that I was going to die without ever really having you! All I could think about was that Bellatrix Lestrange got further with you than I did!”

Harry wasn’t sure exactly at what point she’d started hitting him. She hit like a girl, thumping her hands into his chest, but it wasn’t the physical blows that concerned him in any case. He was surprised, to say the least. Definitely didn’t know what he was supposed to say right now, and it was probably better for him to just keep his mouth shut.

She dealt him one last blow and stood up with a jerk, moving away from him, snorting with rage. Harry stood up, wondering if he was supposed to stay with her or leave the tent for a while. With a shriek, she shoved him, and he let himself fall down onto the bed he’d just made up. Easier than getting in a tussling match with an enraged girl inside a tent.

Abruptly, all her anger left her. He saw it go. She became very still, and her breathing slowed down. She had her eyes locked on him, and he thought he shouldn't move.

Slowly, she lowered herself to her knees. Their faces were level, and hers had a very determined expression. Harry saw that her trembling had begun again. Was she still angry with him?

"Harry," she whispered, and fell forward. He thought she was fainting and caught her, his hands moving out instinctively. Then he found that she had planted her lips on his.

"Oh," he said in shock.

He felt sure that they still needed to talk or something, but it could wait. He applied himself to the task that had presented itself, and kissed her until she was gasping for breath. His hands were gripping her under the arms, until they really weren't and they were actually just resting lightly against her ribs while his fingers began to quest towards her breasts.

She pulled back, the sucking sound of their lips parting was loud in the tent. She was breathing heavily.

"Sorry?" he ventured, lowering his hands.

Her own hands, still trembling, grabbed the hem of his shirt and jerked it up. It was lift his arms or get his shoulders dislocated, so he lifted his arms and let her pull his shirt off.

"Um, Hermione."

"Shut up," she said with feeling, and her hands ran a shaky path from his stomach to his shoulders. Then she pushed him over. He fell back willingly, and then she was leaning over him, crawling over him to straddle him and pin him again with her lips. The trembling was going away as she lost herself in what she was doing.

She was on her knees, one leg on either side of him, and her head was retreating. He raised himself up on his elbows to keep the connection of their mouths, and her hands roamed over his chest and sides. When she pulled back yet further to slide her hands over his hips, he left off her mouth and began kissing a trail along her neck. Deep, sucking kisses that made her gasp. His mouth moved over her collarbone and kept going down, and then she shivered violently.

He dropped his head back, letting his shaggy hair swing away from his sweating neck.

“Sorry,” he slurred. It was an automatic apology, because he knew better than to reach for those parts of her.

But she made a noise of pure exasperation. “You—” Unable to find the words for what she wanted, she took his hands, which he had firmly planted against the bed so he wouldn’t grab at her, and placed them where her shirt met her jeans.

Wonderingly, he looked up at her. “Are you sure?”

With a growl, she yanked her own shirt off and leaned forward again to plant a nip and a kiss just behind his ear. He shuddered, and his control was undone. He gripped her by the shoulders and let his lips finish the journey they’d begun. He used his thumbs to slide her bra straps off her shoulders while he kissed at her collarbone. He unclasped the bra with one practiced hand while the other stroked her stomach. He let his mouth go to work.

She sat back on her haunches, letting her head fall back, her eyes seeing nothing but sparks and her breath rasping in her throat.

“I never . . . never thought . . . feels so good . . . hurt before . . .”

Her scramble to sound coherent just made him laugh, his warm breath puffing out over her chest and making her squirm even more. It wasn’t funny, that she had expected pain, it really wasn’t, but this was so amazing, to be able to do this for her. She should know how good this was. And it was good. His own need to take this further could be damned, he was going to do this for her, just this, to let her

stake her physical claim like she wanted to do. She wasn't ready for more.

With a groan, she fell forward and began kissing him. Everywhere she could reach, from that insanely sensitive spot behind his ear, down his chest, and further . . . oh, god. She was nuzzling her face around his bellybutton. She shouldn't . . . he couldn't . . . Thank god. She was moving back up, up to . . . oh, back up his chest, to pay him a little of the courtesy he'd shown her, and that was . . . well, it was nice, to say the least. His hands slid up and down her bared back, marveling at how silky that skin was, and how warm her mouth was, and how good it felt to let his mouth roam over her and make her see that trust was possible, even here. But it was too much. He knew it was, and he forced himself to speak.

"Hermione," he gasped. "Please."

She raised her head, and gave him a puzzled look. "What?"

"This is . . . well, this is great. But you have to stop."

"Why?" she asked, her face aghast.

"Because if we don't stop now, I can't . . . Hermione, it's been a long time since I last had . . . um, it's been a while. And if we keep going, then I need to be able to finish. I'm not sure I'll be able to stop when you want me to. And I never, never want to force you."

Her mouth, that clever little mouth, curved up in the most wicked grin he'd ever seen. "I don't want to stop," she purred.

"Are you sure?"

Her mouth latched onto his again, and he fell back with a groan of something that was almost pain. She didn't understand, and he'd have to find the ability to control himself on his own.

"You're amazing," she whispered against his mouth, her cheek sliding over his. "I can't believe how much you care about me. And that's why I'm not afraid of this. Because I'm with you."

Just as he felt himself melt into that, that glowing pulse of assurance that his love had been enough, her hands found the buttons on his fly. He held his breath, forcing his hands to be still. She wanted this, but he had to be careful. He could do this.

"I don't know exactly where to go from here," she murmured, her face tense. "The first time, it was . . ."

He kissed away the expression on her face. "It's okay. I know what to do."

"Show me," she whispered.

Slowly. Ever so slowly, he showed her.

They were laying still, cooling off. They were still naked, and her sweaty skin glided over his as she worked her way into his embrace, settling herself against his side. He let out a deep sigh of utter contentment. Her laughter was a warm, sticky sensation against his chest.

"Doesn't take much to make you happy," she teased.

"Nor you," he said in a lazy drawl.

Her hair was spread out all over him, sticking to the drying sweat. It tickled when she moved her head to burrow even further against him.

"I'm a little embarrassed," she murmured.

"Because you don't have any clothes on?" he drawled.

"No," she said, pinching the skin on his ribs. "Because I was so clueless. I just . . . thought it would hurt more than that."

His hand stroked her shoulder. "The first time, I hear, usually does. But not like you had. That wasn't right."

"What should it have been like?"

“Like it just was, only with a bit of a pinch when I went in.”

“Oh. Well, I’m glad. That it didn’t hurt at all, with you. It was . . . perfect.”

“That it was,” he agreed with a yawn.

She levered herself up with one arm and gazed down on him with a petulant look. “I heard men fall asleep after sex, but I thought it was a joke!”

He grinned, feeling warm and calm and completely unable to move. “Not really. I mean, I hardly ever sleep already, and the last few days have been very stressful, and I haven’t been this relaxed in ages, you know . . .”

She punched him on the arm. “You can’t fall asleep now!”

“Why not? We already finished. Twice.”

She grinned. “I suppose we did.”

“We could both sleep,” he suggested.

She lay back down. “We should get clean first.”

He grunted. It might have been agreement. But he wasn’t about to get up. And Hermione was beginning to think that a nap might be nice. Because really, it hadn’t hurt, but she was feeling sort of weak, and she was beginning to think she was going to be a little sore, later. So she lay her head down against him, feeling somehow proud, like she’d accomplished something. And beautiful, because he’d just spent hours worshiping her body. And closer and more in love than ever. And maybe just a little sleepy.

It was only afternoon, but it was warm in their tent, and they were satisfied. They slept.

The man has been waiting for him, but he is not surprised. He knew how angry the man would be, how much he would desire confrontation, but his ability to shut the man out is too good when he's awake. The man must wait for him to sleep to find him, to demand answers. He is ready for the angry man.

"What have you done?" the man shouts, with that strange hissing quality that so defines him, here in this dark corridor where they meet.

"Broke into a Gringotts vault, obviously," he retorts.

"What have you taken?" the man howls at him.

Let the man rant and rave. He doesn't care. He has no fear, just now. "Nothing."

"Do not lie to me, boy! What was it?"

"I didn't take anything," he replies, feeling calm still. The man can yell at him, but he cannot touch him, for he cannot find him. He is sleeping peacefully and safely, no matter what the man might say here in this corridor of his mind. He is warm and content.

"Come, Harry," he says in his sibilant voice, calming himself to sound more reasonable. "You would not go to so much trouble for no reason, would you?"

"Of course not," he replies. He likes it when the man acts reasonable, it's so much easier to deal with. "But I didn't go to all that trouble to steal money or trinkets from them. I have my own. I didn't want anything from their vault."

"Do not act like a spoiled child with me, Harry Potter!"

"I just wanted to prove it could be done, you pathetic old man. You think you're invincible, and maybe you are. But your people aren't, are they? Eh, Riddle? I got inside. I went into your stronghold, and I spoke to your Death Eaters. I touched them. I stole from them. I played with them. Me. The one person you most wanted to find was walking through the same place you lay your head at night. I drew

blood from your most trusted lieutenant. And it was fun, Riddle. I can't lie. It was bloody fun to do it to you."

"What did you take?" he pants with fury.

"Your peace of mind," he smirks.

And he shuts the man out. He forces himself back toward the edge of consciousness, away from the place where he can be reached, but something is wrong, is different . . .

The darkness of the corridor, the hissing of the man's voice, it clings to him like a dark, sticky web. The man is following him up to the surface, he isn't letting go. Riddle is angry, more angry than ever before. He can't shake him off. The man is trying to take control, and he seems to have found some dark corner where he can dig in his fingers and cling. Panicked, he forces himself to laugh and pretend it isn't happening.

"Just a kid, your enemy, and I got into your most guarded places!"

The taunt fails to shake his enemy loose, but he keeps fighting, keeps clawing his way through that never-ending dark corridor, fighting the sticky shadows, feeling a strange stinging sensation—

"HARRY!"

He came around to find her slapping him, his face and his chest and his arms, slapping him silly, the blows open-handed and painful. He grabbed at her arms, forcing them aside, and turned his face to avoid being struck again.

"Wait, stop, stop, ouch!"

"Harry," Hermione sobbed in relief, throwing herself over him and breaking down in tears. "Oh, Harry, are you okay? You were talking in your sleep. I knew you were talking to him, and I tried to wake you up, but I couldn't! I thought he was . . . I thought he was taking you!"

Still naked, he noticed, and sticky with dry sweat. He couldn't have been asleep for too terribly long.

"It's okay." His throat hurt. Had he been screaming or something? He reached his arms up to hold her, to comfort himself with the warmth of her body against his. "I'm okay now."

"I'm sorry for hitting you, but I didn't know what else to do!"

"You did the right thing," he muttered, feeling shaken and scared despite his best efforts to convince himself that there was nothing to be afraid of. "You did. Thank you."

"Was it him?"

"Yeah. It was him. For a minute . . . he had me." He shuddered, and so did she. "Thank you," he said again, fervently. He let out a deep breath, trying to release his tension. "Let's take a bath and get dressed, okay? We should study tonight."

Hermione was agreeable to the idea of finding something to do. They didn't bring up the many frightening ideas they began to have about what might have happened. Because he'd woken up, and they were going to be okay.

Severus Snape was sitting in Albus Dumbledore's office, his hands steepled in front of him and a feeling of nausea in his stomach. It was not his office, no matter how much time he spent in it. When Dumbledore's things had been left to Longbottom and Potter, Severus had not bothered replacing them with any of his own effects, and the shelves sat empty. Dust had gathered thickly to mute the gleam of the polished old wood. He didn't care. He had never counted on being around long enough for it to matter.

It would be a sort of sacrilege, he thought, to cover those shelves in his things, when he was the reason the last headmaster was dead. But these were not the thoughts that occupied him just now. He was concerned with the events of this morning. This morning, something had happened.

He never ate in front of the students, as the rest of the staff did. He preferred to seem completely aloof. Let them wonder if he feasted on ritually slaughtered kittens in a gravy of unicorn blood. He did, however, drink a cup of tea from his place at the head of the table, while looking at all of the worst troublemakers in turn until they were shaking in their shoes. It made him look close to omniscient to glare at them as if he knew what they had been doing, all while nonchalantly enjoying his morning routine.

But this morning, there had been something wrong with his tea. He was used to angry looks from the rebellious students and lots of blinking and lowered heads from those who wanted to be unnoticed. This morning, there had been something else in their eyes. Interest. Almost an anticipation. He had immediately gotten up to stroll around the room, ostensibly to make them uncomfortable with his proximity, but in actuality because he had been afraid that some type of malicious prank had been set up around his seat.

He'd strolled for a while, caught sight of Neville Longbottom, and felt as though he'd been punched in the gut. The Carrows, being the only professors who spoke to him at this point, had told him that Longbottom was at the top of their "people to destroy" list. This was how he'd known that Longbottom was living up to what Black had set for him to do, "his part for the Order of the Phoenix." Being the bane of Amicus and Alecto's existence was Longbottom's job. But Severus had not actually looked at Longbottom in quite some time, and what he saw was horrendous. He was one gigantic mass of bruises and cuts. But he raised his eyes to his headmaster and gave him a serene look that should not have been possible for someone who suspected that Severus had killed his adopted grandfather. He had accepted this role, and so, to look at them, had some of the prefects. Even Veronica Vanderlay was sporting a few ugly injuries. Not just the injuries, but the same look of acceptance of what they'd chosen.

He'd covered his surprise (and surprising feelings of guilt) by raising his cup and giving the Weasley girl a long glare over the rim of his cup. He had to maintain the image, even if they had forced him out of his seat, even if he was reeling from the realization of what these children had taken upon themselves. He'd stopped himself from drinking the tea immediately. He wasn't sure how he knew. It was

odourless, tasteless, colourless—he just knew. Chalk it up to years of experience. There was poison in his tea.

So he did the only thing he could think of. Silently, with the cup at his lips, he had Vanished the liquid, filled it with water, and sipped it with leisure. He was afraid that there had been a bit of poison clinging to the edges of the cup, but he drank the water and hoped it wouldn't kill him. He saw many eyes on him—so many, that he knew drawing the truth out of them would be a long, difficult, and bloody experience.

That was why he sat here now. Did he admit he had discovered the poison, replaced it with water, and did he proceed to seek out the guilty party (or parties, as was more likely the case)? It would take days. It would be filled with screaming. It would be one massive headache, and at the end of it he would only be resented more than he already was. Was it worth it? Perhaps he could ignore it. Perhaps the simple fact that he did not take action would scare them more than his threats. They would think he was plotting revenge, wouldn't they?

And, he had to admit, making himself look invincible did factor in. If he pretended he had drunk the poison and suffered no ill effects, it made him appear beyond the reach of anyone, student or otherwise. What awe they would have if they thought he could drink poison and show no sign of it! It wasn't that he wanted to be held in awe, exactly. But it was certainly insurance against another such attempt.

"Ah!" he gasped as the Mark on his arm flared to life. "What?" he said in disbelief. His master rarely called him during the day, knowing that he had duties to attend here. But right now, and with such urgency? He could think of only one thing that would elicit such an action from the Dark Lord.

"It's Potter," he said, and felt a weight drop onto his shoulders. If the boy had not completed the task Albus had given him then Severus would have to rescue the boy, somehow. He would have to do it in some way that would not lead to his exposure as a . . . whatever he was. He wasn't a spy, not anymore. He was not even truly double-crossing anyone, now. He had no label, no clear mission. Just to stand until Potter was finished.

He didn't know how he was going to keep Potter from the Dark Lord. But he couldn't plan it until he saw the situation for himself, and keeping his master waiting was a very poor idea.

He Flooed Amicus in his classroom office to inform him that he would be out of the school for a bit, and received a knowing leer. Merlin, but the Carrows were horrible little creatures. He didn't know which of the two was worse.

With that thought, he departed for Malfoy Manor, and his master.

The whole place was in an uproar when he arrived. He could hear people arguing in the dining hall that served them as a meeting room, the swearing and shouting sort of argument. House elves were bustling to and fro, looking frightened, some of them sporting very recent self-inflicted injuries. He steeled himself to hear about some kind of attack perpetrated by the Order, one he should have been omniscient enough to see coming and so should have warned them about.

He emptied his mind, as much as possible. He called to mind the things he knew about Sirius Black and the Order of the Phoenix, and let them fill up his consciousness, beginning to select the things he could actually say. It wasn't as though he hadn't said it all before, but his master was the sort of person who liked to reiterate important information. He would keep it simple and direct, and he would allow nothing that was not on this topic into his conscious thoughts.

His unconscious thoughts were hidden, wrapped up in a maze of complexity, of swirling mental fog that was the metaphor he'd chosen for himself. Other people's defenses were more direct—a wall, a box, a locked door—while his was a work of art. An ever-shifting fog that was so obscure, no one could tell it was a defense. Anyone with a minor knowledge of Legilimency simply assumed he didn't think much, or that he was a confused person.

He walked into the room. The Dark Lord was standing extremely still, at the head of the table. All three of the Lestranges were shouting at one another, while Hunter and Saarsgard stared at the table-top,

looking murderously upset. Hunter had blood soaking his shirt, and Saargard was sporting the hives-like rash produced by a Stinging Hex. Which made no sense, because if Severus knew anything about the Order, it was that they took themselves too seriously to use such juvenile techniques. The only people who would deign to use such spells, that might go up against the Death Eaters, was . . . but what could have led to this group going up against members of Potter's Defense League?

He looked directly at his master, lowering his head in submission, trying to keep his thoughts locked down tight, whether they were relevant now or not.

"My lord, I came as soon as I could. What's happened?"

The Lestrangle brothers began trying to speak over one another. They quit when the Dark Lord cut a silent look at them, going pale and shutting their mouths. Severus had to hide a smirk at how bad Rabastan looked. He was terribly battered.

"What has happened, Severus," the master said in a cold, clear voice, "is that a child you assured me was nothing more than a braggart has managed to infiltrate our headquarters and to steal our possessions."

Severus felt the bottom dropping out from under him, felt it with a sickened dizziness that he masked with the ease of long practice. He held it in, and kept his voice impossibly steady.

"Are you speaking of Potter, my lord?"

Voldemort bared his teeth and hissed. Well, that was an unusual response, but if what he was saying was true, then Severus could understand the outburst. If he held Severus to blame for not foreseeing this, he had no defense.

"He came here?"

"Look what he did to my wife!" Rodolphus shouted, jerking Bellatrix's head to the side to reveal the raw-looking wound to her ear. It looked like . . . a bite mark? Actually, it looked rather like the marks

Rodolphus placed on her from time to time, since Merlin knew he couldn't get it up for her without the sight of blood. But Potter had done it, and that was too impossible to be believed.

"And he took something?"

"He took the key to our vault," Bellatrix said, and her eyes were far away, almost dreamy, despite the rough way her husband was jerking her head around. "Right off my neck. While I was bleeding."

If Severus was gathering this correctly, Harry Potter had somehow gotten into Malfoy Manor, and sexually assaulted a crazy person so he could steal her gold. While he could believe Potter had the resources and intelligence necessary to do so, he could not think of a reason for it. It didn't make sense with what he knew of Potter—what he really knew, not what he said he knew based on the way Potter presented himself to the Dark Lord.

Not able to make sense of the angry ramblings of the Lestrangle family, he turned back to his master and bowed his head, waiting to understand why he was here.

"Tell me how this happened, Severus."

He straightened, and made his face level, almost serene. He was a Death Eater, fulfilling the role he played for them. He was not a liar, and the information he was giving them was true and accurate. He replaced his thoughts about the Order with these thoughts, and asked the question he needed to protect himself.

"Tell me more, my lord. Tell me what he did, and what he said."

And so Severus learned of how Potter had disguised himself as both Markowicz and Rodolphus himself, stolen the key from Bellatrix, and used his friends to help him breeze right into the bank vault—and also of how the Dark Lord had confronted him when he had fallen asleep a few minutes ago, and Potter's own explanation for his actions.

Then the Dark Lord's burning eyes became more focused on him, and Severus took a deep breath.

"This seems typical of his arrogant, juvenile ideas," he said scathingly. "Of course he would think it was amusing to make us believe he could harm us. It is so very much like Potter to break into a bank vault for fun rather than for gain. He is a child, as you said yourself, and he acts like one. I must admit, my lord, that I have misjudged his capabilities. I did not believe he possessed the ability to plan such a complex scheme. In fact, I would believe it was more likely that Potter got advice from Black. Black has always thought of himself as clever."

"So you do not think he was lying?" the master asked harshly. "You think he truly was gloating over such a ridiculous victory?"

"He probably thought this was just like winning a Quidditch game," Severus said dryly. "He will never grow up, not so long as he listens to Black."

The Dark Lord took a breath, his slitted nostrils flaring, then spun on his heel and marched from the room, shouting "Find that brat and bring him to me!"

Severus followed him. "My lord, there is one thing we have not yet tried, but one that I think may bring Potter out of hiding."

"Is that so?" he snapped.

"For all his inadequacies, Potter is extremely loyal to his friends," Severus ventured.

He had to do this, and he did not allow himself to think about whether or not he wanted to. What he wanted was to be a perfect Death Eater, to be in position by his master's side at that climactic moment that he also did not allow himself to think about. That climactic moment needed Potter's success to happen, but Severus had to be as helpful as possible in bringing Potter to them. It was a fine line to walk. He had to make this suggestion, and he had to hope that Potter would know better than to take the bait.

“We know their location of some of his friends, my lord. The time is right to strike them. Potter will hear about our attack, and he will come rushing to their rescue. We will have him, then. We do not need to expend our efforts looking for him. We can bring him to us, and we can deal with some of our other enemies at the same time.”

His master stared at him for a long time, brushing over his mind with an amazingly delicate touch. He would not find anything. He had never found anything, not in Severus.

“You have someone in mind for the first attack?”

“I do.”

“Bellatrix will be in charge of planning this,” he said with finality.

“After she allowed Potter to steal from her, in her own room?”

His lip curled. “I have seen her memory, and I do not hold her responsible. That insolent brat was a compelling actor. She is who I want in charge of this attack. I will see to it, Severus. Return to your students.”

“Yes, my lord,” he said with a final bow. He was intensely grateful to have escaped the wrath that his lord was keeping contained until he found a good release. He would depart immediately, and maybe then he could finally get that thrice-damned cup of tea he’d been tricked out of. . .

“Severus. Tell me why tea is suddenly so important to you,” the master said in a silky voice.

His heart jumped. He had not even known the Dark Lord was still watching his thoughts. His instinct to create a convincing lie was not worth the effort this time, so he simply told the truth about the attempted poisoning.

“And what are your plans to punish the culprits?”

“I have none,” Severus said calmly.

“Explain.”

“Let them think I am invincible,” he said with a slight smirk. “Let them think I drank poison and that it cannot kill me.”

Next thing he knew, he was on the floor, stunned by the pain reverberating through his body.

“You dare!” his master was seething, yelling at him. “You dare to aspire to what I have done! You think you can claim you have accomplished what I have done! I will not allow it!”

Severus was beyond surprised. He had meant nothing of the kind, and he had assumed his master would appreciate his reasoning. But he hadn't, and Severus knew better than to resent the fact that he had not judged his master properly. He'd expected to be left in peace to run the school as he saw fit, and instead was being subjected to the Cruciatus curse. There was nothing he could do to stop it. This was his master. This was what a Death Eater lived with to serve the Dark Lord Voldemort. This was his life.

Potter, whatever you are doing, you must hurry. You haven't much time.

Dora giggled when Remus splayed his hands across her gently rounded belly, his fingers sliding slowly over the taut skin. He had an almost goofy smile on his face, his joy so obvious he thought it could be seen from space. She was sitting in their armchair, and he was slowly lowering himself down to kneel on the floor in front of her. He placed a soft kiss on her growing belly, and his fingers felt the signs of life inside.

“I love you, too, but you must be still now so that your mama can sleep,” he whispered to her womb.

Her fingers brushed over his hair. He looked up at her with his blinding smile, and said nothing. Her hand slid over his cheek, which was stubbled with two days' growth of beard, and his look at her deepened.

"I can't wait until this baby is born," he murmured.

Her fingers clenched convulsively. "Me, either."

He laid his cheek on her leg and sighed. "I can still hardly believe we're married, and here we are with a baby on the way. It's going to be wonderful, when this war is over, and we can have a proper house. We'll have Simon back, and we'll finally get the chance to be a family . . ."

"With bedrooms far, far apart," she said in a low voice.

His hand ran over her thigh. "Yes. That goes without saying."

"Remus? You know that I'm happy, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"This little place, out in the middle of nowhere, with an important task to do—it might not seem like much to anyone else, but I'm happy here. I'm happy wherever you are."

"Yes, I do know that. Finally."

"Good. Now let me up so I can pee."

"You just did, five minutes ago," he chuckled, but he stood up and held out his hands to help her to her feet. He pecked her cheek as she playfully pushed him aside. "You're very brave, Dora my love."

"And don't you forget it," she grumbled.

Once she'd closed the bathroom door, he sank down into the armchair himself, and sighed deeply. Yes, he really had finally come to accept that she loved him and she'd take him the way he was. Just in time, really, with their child coming—

"Remus! Is that the alarm at the gate?"

“Yes!” he shouted, his heart leaping into his throat.

“Is my wand on the table?”

“Dora, don’t you dare! Stay here! Stay safe!”

He bolted out the door, feeling sick. Yorick and Neil pulled night duty so the married folks could have time to themselves. For the two of them to see trouble they couldn’t handle could only mean one thing.

“Boss!” Neil shouted as he and Yorick shoved the gate shut. “It’s bad!”

“What is it?”

“Death Eaters! Lots of them! Greyback is here!”

Remus just stared at them in shock. This was it, then. They’d finally made enough nuisance of themselves to merit this visit, one he’d known would come eventually. They couldn’t hide their location forever, and while no one could Apparate within this area, that didn’t mean the walls couldn’t be—

BOOM.

The first wave of attack on the gate made the entire wall around the compound shudder. The rest of the werewolves were spilling out of the cabins now, more or less clothed. Jeremy was down to his pants, and Laura was clutching a blanket around her shoulders to hide her nightie. Franka, thankfully, took the time to put on a nightie before running out into the open.

“What’s happening?”

“Are we being attacked?”

“Remus, what is it?”

The panicked shouts were too loud, and he needed to think. But there was no time to think, there was only moments, and then they’d be—

BOOM.

Another shudder.

“Okay!” Remus shouted. “Listen to me!” Heads that had not already been turned his way came to attention. “We’ll hold them off as long as we can, but they will eventually get through that gate! Yorick, Neil, Franka, and I, will keep them distracted once that happens, while the rest of you run outside the Apparation wards and get the hell out of here! We’ll follow you when we can, and we’ll meet up again at the Ministry tomorrow morning. Got it?”

“But you can’t hold them all off!” Laura wailed.

“We can hold them long enough,” Remus growled, locking eyes with Yorick and Neil. Franka hurried to his side.

“Me?” she asked.

Remus nodded sharply. “You’re a good fighter, Franka.” He took a deep breath. “And you’re single.”

Her eyes gleamed with understanding, reflecting the moonlight. “You’re not,” she said simply.

He took a deep breath. “I can’t tell you to risk your life for me, Franka, while I run to safety. Not me.”

She said nothing more, but darted away to meet up with the two guards. He felt a presence at his shoulder, and turned to see that Dora was at his side.

“No!” he roared. “Stay back until we clear a safe path out of the gate!”

She glared at him. “Are you joking? I’m an Auror!”

“You’re pregnant! Keep yourself and the baby safe!”

Then there was no more time to argue, for just then, the gate collapsed with a roar of flame.

“Good. Add the next ingredient.”

“Which is . . .”

“Merlin, what am I, your textbook? I thought you said you studied this before we started brewing it.”

“I did! That doesn’t mean I can remember the whole thing.”

“It’s the diced pods, there. Which I would hardly call diced, by the way, more like roughly cut in half.”

“They’re diced!”

“Well, just add them and hope it doesn’t melt your cauldron.”

“There. My cauldron is still solid.”

“Good enough. Now stir.”

“Clockwise?”

“Yes, clockwise.”

Sirius hid his grin behind his copy of the latest edition of The Quibbler. He’d gotten a tip that it was a good read, this time. Surprisingly, it was. It was dedicated to supporting the mysteriously absent Harry Potter, and declaring that if he was absent, it was because he was trying to fight Voldemort. And possibly because he was having secret sessions with the also-absent Minister Bones, although she at least had graciously continued to correspond with the outside world from time to time.

He was reading this magazine while he watched a great bit of entertainment in the Potions laboratory that had somehow, through no consent of his own, sprung up in his house. He had been trying to teach Simon his third-year coursework, and also trying to coach

Draco on his NEWT studies. Tonight, they were acting on the theory that Draco would benefit from presiding over Simon's Potions lesson. Turned out they were both benefiting, in so far as they were both getting to practice holding their temper when someone was needling them.

"Okay. Are you done?"

"I don't know. Am I?"

"You tell me, Billings. You're the one who is brewing this potion. You need to be able to tell when the mixture has reached its stable point."

Simon peered doubtfully into his cauldron, stirred it twice more, and looked up. "I'm done."

"Thank Merlin," Sirius muttered. "It's late. You boys clean up your mess, and then Simon needs to go to bed."

Simon shot him a glare. "Draco doesn't have to go to bed."

"Draco is nearly eighteen years old and currently has steady employment in this laboratory. You, Mr. Billings, can claim neither. Clean up the lab, and get to bed. You have a full day of studying ahead of you tomorrow."

The look he was getting from Simon declared his undying hatred for Sirius, but Sirius was willing to put up with it. Simon didn't have to like him, didn't have to like his studies or his rules or anything about him, really. He just had to do it, anyway. When Remus was ready to bring him back home, he'd find out that Sirius was quite lenient, all things considered.

Draco, wisely, did not smirk, gloat, or anything of the sort. He was carefully returning all his ingredients to their rightful places and pretending he couldn't hear Simon's complaints. Shocking, from that one. Sirius didn't think the kid had that much maturity in him. Maybe he was actually growing up.

There was a banging downstairs, loud banging. Someone knocking, with a sort of desperate urgency to it. Sirius was becoming used to this sort of thing, and he jumped up and hurried for the stairs to go down to get the door. He stopped in shock at the top of the flight when the door opened and people began spilling into his home. He had his wand out and his first hex ready when he recognized them.

“Remus!” he shouted, rushing down the stairs. “Remus, my god, what happened?”

Remus was bleeding from a really nasty gash on his head, and he was helping his wife carry Neil between them. Behind them were Jeremy and Addison, who were attempting to hold one another up despite the fact that they had both obviously suffered hexes that affected their ability to walk.

“Death Eater attack,” Remus grunted. “We’ve got to see to Neil right away.”

Sirius took Neil’s arm, gently nudging Dora out of the way, and they hefted the nearly-unconscious man up the stairs.

“At the compound? How many?”

“All of ‘em,” Neil grunted, then his head lolled back, spilling ashes from his long hair. The room was beginning to smell strongly of woodsmoke and burnt skin.

Sirius looked at Remus.

“I’m not sure. Twenty-five? That included Greyback and the men he’s gathered.”

Draco and Simon were standing in the door of the Potions lab, looking concerned and curious. Draco immediately ducked back inside at the sight of Neil, and began clearing off his large table.

“Merlin’s wrinkled sack,” Sirius muttered. “Where’s everyone else?”

Remus didn't answer him. They heaved Neil up onto the table, and Remus immediately turned to grab hold of Dora and shake her by the shoulders.

"I told you to stay safe," he scolded. There was no strength in his words. She gripped him back and buried her face in his shoulder. He put his hands on her shoulders, asking her in a soft murmur about the baby, wrapping an isolated pocket of grief around them.

Sirius looked at Jeremy and Addison, who were both weeping, leaving clean trails through the smear of dirt, blood, and ash coating their faces.

"We are everyone," Addison whispered.

"Everyone is dead," Jeremy confirmed.

"Oh no," Sirius said. "Oh, no."

He looked at Remus, but his old friend was stroking his wife's hair and wearing a hard, impenetrable expression. There was no point trying to say anything to him now. He turned instead to Neil, who was already being looked over by Draco. The blond boy was looking at his pupils, and making him move each appendage in turn. He looked up at Sirius and shook his head hopelessly. They weren't Healers, here, despite the practice they'd been getting.

"We should take Neil to the hospital," Sirius said. "The rest of you, stay here. Clean yourselves up. I'll take him."

Jeremy and Addison nodded. She leaned her head on her man's arm and sobbed, "Yorick."

Sirius met Jeremy's eyes.

"He . . . he was still alive, even at the end after all the fighting he'd done," Jeremy said, struggling to get the words out. "He sacrificed himself to make sure we got out. He held them off while we ran, he made sure they were busy until they couldn't follow our Apparation. And Franka . . ." Jeremy couldn't explain.

Remus shuddered, gripping Dora even more tightly.

Sirius wanted to help, to comfort as best he could. But there was a gravely injured man on the table who needed help. He grabbed hold of Neil and looked at Simon. "Help me get him downstairs to the Floo," he said.

Looking white and shaken, Simon moved to obey. They hurried down, not bothering to make it gentle. He needed medical attention too badly to worry about that.

"Everybody I know," Simon was muttering. "Everybody's dead."

"Simon, are you okay?" Sirius asked, knowing it was a stupid question.

Simon shook his head. "If I'd been there, I'd be dead," he said. "Remus was right to send me here. And now . . ."

And now . . . Sirius couldn't finish the thought, either. After all they'd worked for, they were dead. All their hopes and dreams, placed in Remus' hands, and instead they were drawn into war and slaughtered. So many people he'd come to know and love. And he felt a cold pit growing deep in his belly.

If Harry hears about this, what will he do?

CHP 19